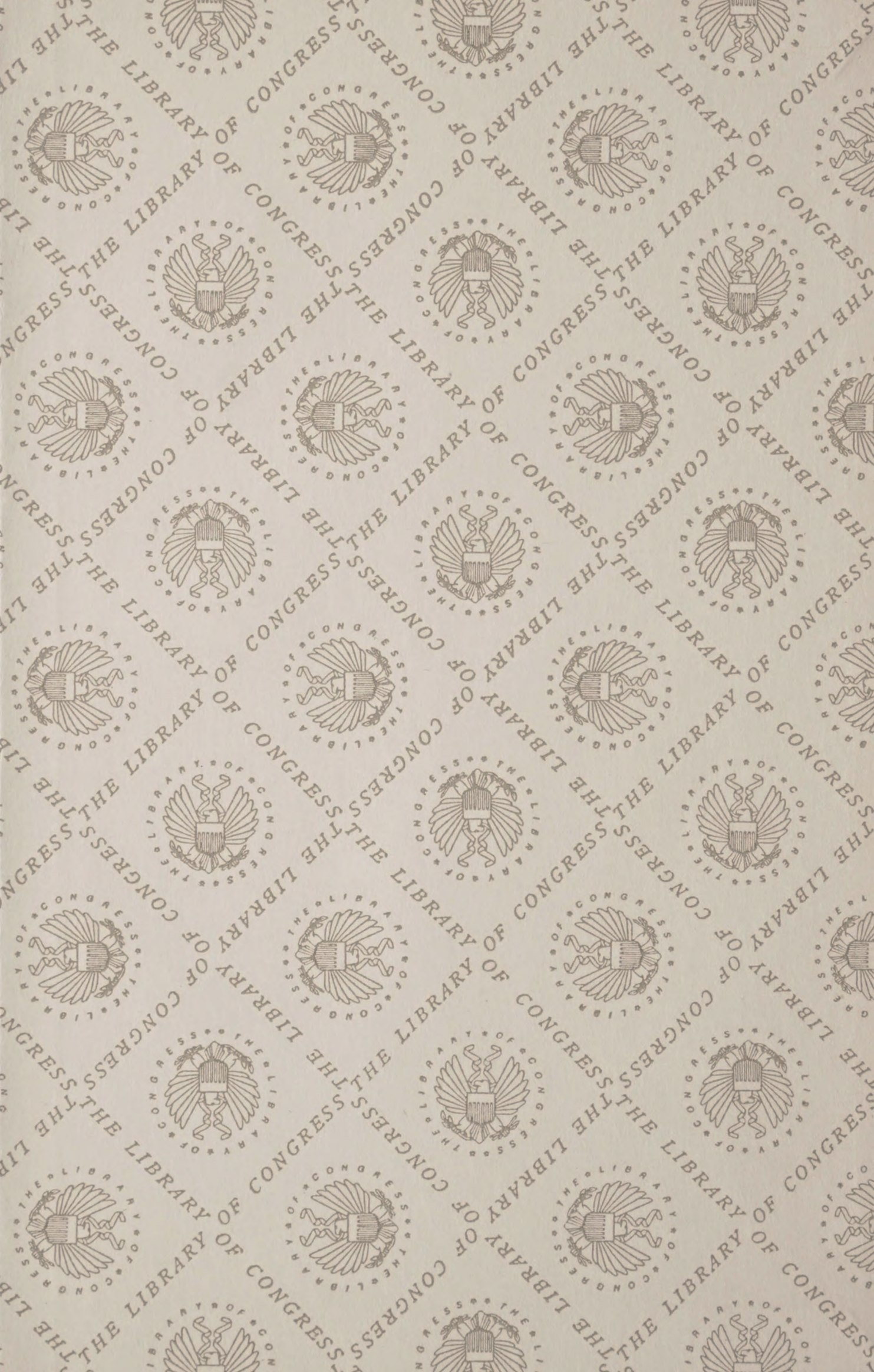

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"Let me introduce you to my friends."—*Page* 14.

THE QUEEN OF JOY

BY

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AUTHOR OF "OCEANA'S GIRLHOOD," "A WILD IRISH GIRL," "THE GIRLS OF MERTON COLLEGE," "FOR DEAR DAD," "KITTY O'DONOVAN," "PEGGY FROM KERRY," "THE CHESTERTON GIRL GRADUATES," "THE GIRLS OF KING'S ROYAL," "THE LADY OF JERRY BOY'S DREAMS," "A PLUCKY GIRL," "A GIRL OF HIGH ADVENTURE," ETC., ETC.

Smith, Mrs. Elizabeth Thomas (Meade)

WITH FOUR HALF-TONE DRAWINGS BY CHARLES L. WRENN

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ILLUSTRATIONS

"Let me introduce you to my friends"..... *Frontispiece*

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Nothing in all the world could be more dignified and stately than her action 47

"Enthrone our Queen, enthrone her!" 210

As she spoke she lifted the dress from its box..... 283

Thus we go on—thus we proceed—
Step follows step—deed follows deed.

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THE QUEEN OF JOY

CHAPTER I.

ENGLISH, FRENCH, GERMAN AND ITALIAN.

The great French School of La Chapelle stood in the centre of a flat plain. The plain was large, and in itself somewhat ugly.

In the days of long ago the school of La Chapelle had been a convent.

But long ere this story opens the nuns had taken their departure. Some of these gracious and much loved sisters had died—some had gone to England—but the bones of the Mother Superior lay buried under the flags close to the altar of the ancient chapel. In this chapel once the nuns had prayed and sung—here also sweet incense had ascended into the air—and here such beauty as their money and their religious training permitted filled the place.

But now all these things had passed out of sight—out even of memory. The chapel was deserted, and the great house had been turned into a school for the daughters of all those who could afford to come there. The place was now alive with eager young voices, quick steps, gay laughter.

The school, which used to be known long, very long, ago as *The Home of the Sacred Heart,* was now called La Chapelle, and was situated in that exceedingly flat part of France which lies between Calais and Paris. Here might be seen long rows of tall, very erect poplar trees—here might be heard the sound of a swift deep flowing river—the river of La Chapelle, after which the school took its name. The grounds surrounding the old house were most beautifully kept. The rose garden belonging to the nuns was still, it is true, undisturbed, but the rest of the wide and spacious grounds were laid out in lawns, in tennis-courts, in hockey grounds, and also in a space for that exceedingly popular game of La Crosse.

The school when this story opens held about ninety girls, thirty of whom were English, five or six Italians, ten German, and the remainder French.

The name of the Principal was Madame la Comtesse de Trés. Her staff of resident teachers were Mlle. Armor, Mlle. Constant, Fräulein Schwann, Miss Tabor and Miss Davenport; also a very bright gay and charming little personage called in the school Mlle. Susanne. In addition, masters and mistresses came once a week from Paris. These professors imparted music in its varied branches, also dancing, also languages. Paris was two hours distant by train, but Madame spared no pains or expense over her school. She had turned what was practically a ruin into a great and thriving school,

and her sincere love for her profession knew no bounds.

One or two of the French girls came from the adjoining small town of Tourelles, but all, whether they lived close by or not, slept at the school, for Madame would not permit any day girls into her school. Amongst the French and Italian girls may specially be mentioned the following: The young and very beautiful Comtesse Caterina de Mori, Mlle. Genette Monita, Mlle. Juliette de Tournay, Mlle. Marguerita de Marni. There were also Jeanne Gérusez and Edmée Leroux, also Signorina Imelda Olivetta and Signorina Gemma Ravella, also Fräulein Compt, etc. Amongst the English girls might be noticed first and foremost Muriel St. John. Muriel was tall, fair and graceful, making in her gracious young presence a striking contrast to her darker companions of La Belle France. There was also Hope Ashley, a very lovely girl with a wonderful expression of goodness and nobility of soul written all over her face with its large greeny-brown eyes and somewhat irregular features. Her smile was swift and sudden—not coming very often, but filling the heart of the one on whom it was bestowed with delight.

On a certain evening close on mid-term in the month of October, a bevy of young English girls might have been seen waiting eagerly in a large, bare Salle de Récréation, as it was called. This room was set apart for the use of all the girls in

the school, but by a sort of right of possession it was invariably used only by the English girls. Here the German girls came evening after evening, but the French and Italian girls preferred other rooms in the old house.

On the present occasion the said English girls were clustered together; they were most eagerly waiting for a fresh member of their school fellows, and many were the conjectures with regard to her.

The English girls slept in a very long dormitory which had once been filled with a long row of cells of the nuns, who had here reposed and from here had risen at midnight and early in the morning for their devotions in the old chapel.

The cells were now turned into bright, cosy little bed-rooms, being papered with gaily flowered papers, and furnished with all that intense coldness, stillness and purity which characterises the best class of French school.

The old doors had been removed from the ancient cells, and warm curtains took their places. The floors were parquetry highly polished. The small narrow beds were white as snow, and the pretty casement windows, cold enough in winter, stood wide open, winter and summer, during the greater part of the day.

Just outside the little bed-rooms ran a long corridor which was lit by several long, narrow windows. The corridor was unadorned except for its parquetry floor.

At one end was a high oak door which communicated with the house. At the further end was another enormous door, which opened on to winding and broken stairs and led eventually to the old granary, and then again by means of a narrow passage to the ancient and long unused chapel. Neither of these high doors had locks or bars of any sort, and it was whispered amongst the more timid of the English girls that the great door leading to the granary was *best kept shut.*

Why? the girls did not dare to ask, even of one another.

There were in all thirty little bed-rooms arranged side by side for the English girls, and in addition there were two more minute bed-rooms, one at each end, one of which was occupied by the English teacher—Miss Tabor—the other by that excellent and talented woman—Fräulein Schwann.

The French, German and Italian girls slept in two enormous dormitories on a lower floor.

These dormitories had been specially fitted up for them, and all traces of the religious past of the house had been swept away. The lower dormitories were neatly and severely furnished, and each girl had her own curtain, which effectually shut her away at night from her companions. But in each of these dormitories there was not only the door of entrance, but three other enormous doors which were unlocked, and which led, some of them down to the old chapel, some of them to the special

room used in her lifetime by the Mother Superior, and others again to different rooms, where different vocations of what in the ancient times was called the religious life went on. French girls are not easily alarmed, but even the beautiful Comtesse, Caterina de Mori, as well as more than one of her young companions, felt a sense of fear in connection with these huge unlocked doors. On this special night there was no French girl in the Salle de Récréation. Mademoiselle Armor, it is true, had tapped for a moment at the door. Hope Ashley went immediately and opened it. Mademoiselle Armor whispered something in a low tone, and Hope returned to her companions, Muriel St. John and Constance Wheeler.

"Madame la Comtesse has gone to the train to meet Joyce Selby," she remarked. "I do wonder what my Joyce of the olden time is like now, and if she will remember me?"

Hope's sweet face flushed with excitement.

Muriel gave her a slightly discontented glance.

"You are so absurdly proud of your relationship," she remarked, the faintest touch of a sneer altering the expression of her beautiful lips for a moment. "I have no doubt she has absolutely forgotten you."

"She is not made that way," said Hope, "and I wish now and then you *would* get enthusiastic, Muriel. It will be such a real pleasure to have her here; and if she is like what she used to be like, it will be quite delightful. In any case she will be

new—a new face to most of us—and from the beloved England."

"I do wonder how the poor thing will like it," said Constance.

"Not at all," remarked Muriel, "at least not for a very long time."

"Never, I should say," echoed Constance. "Fancy how severe are the rules of *La Chapelle*. I for one have not been home for over a year, and on this very morning I received a letter from my parents desiring me to remain at school until the beginning of the long vacation. I call the whole thing sickening and unfair—oh! but most unfair. The French girls who live at Tourelle can go home from Saturday to Monday any week end they like, but we—we *must* stay on. For my part I hate the school."

"Whether you hate it or love it you have got to stay here," remarked Muriel. "For my part I am contented at last for I have made friends."

"And how have you made friends?" answered Constance—she spoke with anger and her eyes sought those of Hope Ashley.

"I would not have your sort of friends," she continued. "I would not take Caterina from Hope; I would not take Juliette from Hope. There are girls in the school who remark these things, Muriel, and who think but little of you for what you have done."

"It does not matter—indeed it does not matter," said Hope in her lovely voice. "Caterina and Ju-

liette and—and *others* will come back to me some day. I am not at all angry—I am ready to wait."

"So you say," remarked Muriel. She looked full at Hope as she spoke.

Hope returned her gaze. Hope had large greeny-brown eyes; a little, short, somewhat piquant face; and an abundance of hair—a perfect wealth of it, which might best be described as bronze in colour. There was not a touch of red in it, but there was a vast lot of gold, dark gold, which gave it that peculiar bronzey tint. It rippled naturally over her low brow, and hung in a long, thick, very thick plait, far below her waist. She was a slight girl, with very dainty hands and feet, but was altogether somewhat on the *petite* scale. Suddenly Muriel raised her finger and said:

"Hark, do hark!" All the girls strained their ears to listen. The great white stove threw a pleasing warmth over the room. The sunset had passed. Muriel moved forward a step, and turned on some electric lights which were situated here and there at considerable distances down the length of the long bare room.

"I do wish," said Hope, "that I had asked Mademoiselle Armor to bring Joyce here on her arrival. We have not a chance of seeing her now until *dîner,* and then they'll all—all—be gazing at her. Oh, Muriel, think of sixty pairs of French, Italian, and German eyes looking you through and through;

and think, in addition, of twenty-seven pairs of English eyes."

"I do pity her—that I do," said Constance.

"English girls who know their manners don't stare," remarked Muriel. "Of course she'll have to fight her own battle, but I mean to help her all I can."

Hope lowered her steady eyes, and the faintest little sigh came from her lips. Muriel went suddenly up to her and laid her hand on her shoulder.

"What is it, Hopey?"

"She's my—my COUSIN, you know," said Hope.

"Well, I never said she wasn't; but that need not prevent her being *my* friend."

Hope suppressed a second sigh, and going up to the white china stove began to warm her small hands. The girls could distinctly hear the bustle of arrival downstairs. This bustle had been preceded by the clumsy sound of a carriage driving up to the front door. Then heavy steps mounted the stairs, and there was the noise, the distinct noise, of an arrival in the great corridor which opened on to the cells.

"I'm just mad to go to her," said Hope. "Do you think I might, Muriel?"

"Of course you mustn't," said Muriel. "We must restrain our impatience until *le dîner*. Miss Tabor will look after her. She's very kind to 'foreigners,' as she calls them. Fancy an Englishwoman calling us foreigners!"

"But we are foreigners in this country," said Hope. "She speaks correctly."

Just then there came a bustling noise in the passage outside, and quite half-a-dozen English girls, followed by one or two French, rushed into the Salle de Récréation. They were all chatting eagerly, like so many inquisitive birds, and all—for that evening at least—in the English tongue. Madame la Comtesse had given this permission in honour of the arrival of the new English pupil.

"I have seen her. Girls, I have seen her!" said Josephine Dalzell. "I just caught a glimpse of her. She's tall and as straight as a maypole, and oh, dark, very, very dark. I don't believe for a moment she is English."

"Why should she not be of Angleterre?" said Genette Menica, speaking in the pretty lisping way which made her attempt at the English language so charming. Genette herself was a very bright little brunette, highly finished and polished to her very finger-tips. She wore her hair in the French style of the young demoiselle—in two long, thick plaits which fell over her shoulders. Her skirt was a short, voluminous plaid; and her little blouse was crimson, very low in the neck and short in the sleeves. She looked in every particular like a true daughter of *La Belle France*. Genette was a great favourite in the School; and indeed it was difficult to find fault with her, for she was charming, gay and obliging.

"It is whispered," she said, "that the new

demoiselle from Angleterre is—oh—of the very—*very* richest; that she possesses a castle all her own, and will—will come out when her education is finished, and her knowledge of our beautiful tongue of France rendered perfect. I long to know more of her—I *will* know more of her."

"You know nothing as yet, Genette, you silly girl," exclaimed Muriel. "And try not to believe half you hear. She is a cousin of Hope's, and Hope would know, if anyone did, if Miss Joyce Selby is a great heiress and has a castle of her own."

"Then you will tell—you will inform—you will enlighten!" exclaimed the French girl, rushing over to Hope, performing a low graceful curtsey, then dropping on one knee and holding up her hands in a pretty, theatrical manner.

"I have nothing to tell," was Hope's reply. "I have known Joyce since we were both little children. I am glad she is coming here. She is nice, I can tell you that."

"Ah—ah! but what care we about the niceness?" cried Genette. "Niceness is all very well. You—you are nice, Hope Ashley, and so is the statuesque Muriel, and so is Connie of the *forte conture*. Forgive me, Connie, I do not laugh indeed; I adore your—what you call—your stoutness—I like not skinny people—oh, by no manner of means. But tell me, Hope, beautiful angel, has she got the *argent*, and the—the *castle*—all her own? If so,

she will be great, very great, some day; and we, her school-fellows, will adore her, as I adore her now."

Hope smiled very gently, if very gravely.

"Get up, Genette, and don't be silly," she said. "Joyce can tell you herself what she likes; it is not my affair."

Genette's little dark face suddenly glowered. Passion filled her black eyes, her lips trembled slightly.

She rose from her kneeling position and, standing in the midst of the group of expectant girls, said quietly, and in a voice of infinite disdain:

"For me—I care not for the English Mees—I care not at all for the Mees from Angleterre—that country of snow and ice—of cold, cold hearts—of reserve, oh, *magnifique,* but intolerable! I want to say something to you—yes, to you *all*—on this night when we must talk the hateful tongue of Angleterre."

The girls crowded round her; there was something breathless and extraordinary in her manner.

"It is this," she continued, "and you must—oh, you must keep it as a secret of the most profound. The rats! You know how we suffer from the rats, but *are* they rats? I ask that the problem should be solved."

Hope felt her face turning a shade paler, but before anyone could answer or make the faintest comment, the great door at the further end of the Salle de Récréation was flung wide, and Madame La Comtesse herself, Madame la Comtesse de Trés,

entered, leading by the hand a tall and extraordinarily beautiful girl.

"I break the rules on this rare occasion, my beloved pupils," she said, "in order to present to you personally a new inmate of our famous School. This young lady—Miss Joyce Selby—will be pleased, I am sure, to make your acquaintance. You on your part, my children, will do your utmost to make the stranger from a foreign land at home and happy in this new land of her adoption. Adieu, my children. But one word first. There will be special *dîner* for all the English girls in my private salle à manger this evening. There we shall meet again. Adieu, my children!"

"But—but——" gasped Genette, "is it not possible, Madame la Comtesse, to make an exception in favour of one little French girl—one French demoiselle with a hungry heart?"

"No, no, *no,* Genette; you sup as usual with the demoiselles of your own fair country."

The comtesse sailed out of the room. The great doors closed behind her, and the next moment Joyce, who was a little dazzled by so many strange faces, suddenly fixed her eyes upon that of Hope Ashley. A glad, surprised cry broke from her lips. She rushed up to Hope and kissed her with a quick passion. Had she been a French girl she would have lingered over the caress; but being essentially English, she brought it to a conclusion with as great a

rapidity as she had bestowed it. Hope instantly took her friend and cousin's hand.

"I would not tell you I was here, Joyce; I wanted it to be a surprise. Let me introduce you to my friends." She took Joyce's hand and led her up at once to Muriel.

"Miss Muriel St. John," she said—"Miss Constance Wheeler. The Comtesse Caterina de Mori—Mademoiselle Genette Monita."

Joyce had abundant dignity. She coolly and carefully took the measure of each girl as she was introduced to her. Her own appearance was something like that of a young queen receiving the addresses of her court. There was no doubt whatsoever, and the persons who most realised this fact were Muriel St. John and Juliette de Tournay, that Joyce Selby would be a power in the School. Her noble young presence was the very essence of true English dignity, and yet where and in what direction had she acquired those wonderful flashing dark eyes—so deeply, darkly, dangerously blue—or *what* colour were they—surrounded by lashes black as ink, and curling upwards like an Irish girl's? Where had she got her great wealth of raven black hair? Her small but imperious features?—her mouth with its cupid's bow—her pearly white teeth—and, above all, the faint English wild roses on her cheeks? Each girl who glanced at her acknowledged beyond doubt her beauty. They had yet to feel her charm.

CHAPTER II.

THE RECEPTION FEAST.

Besides the girls mentioned in the last chapter, namely, the Comtesse Caterina de Mori, the two Italian girls, Signorina Imelda Olivetta and Signorina Gemma Ravella, were of course several others.

Amongst these may be specially mentioned a very clever, very sunny-faced girl who went by the name of Alain de St. Aignan. There was also rather sad-faced little Jeanne Gerusez; and bright, pretty Edmée Leroux; Mlle. Marguerite de Marni—a good girl with no particular force of character—and Mlle. Juliette de Tournay—gay, laughing, passionate, and French to her backbone.

In addition to the girls and their teachers there was a certain woman who has a great deal to do with this story. This woman lived in the adjacent small town of Tourelle and called herself Citoyenne Pelven.

Citoyenne Pelven was a republican through and through, but she was far too wise to talk of her principles. She did a very fine trade at the school of La Chapelle, bringing almost every day a large

flat basket to a certain portion of the grounds. This basket she hung after a peculiar fashion round her neck, allowing it to rest comfortably against her ample bust. The basket was covered with a snowy white cloth; and when the cloth was removed and French and English, German and Italian girls crowded round to admire and exclaim, Citoyenne Pelven had a really good time. For there were no cakes like hers in the whole of Tourelle. There was no pastry to equal her tartlets; there was no confectionery to come up to her chocolates, bonbons, and sweetmeats of every sort and description.

Invariably day by day Citoyenne Pelven reaped a rich harvest out of the ninety young girls who lived in the school. The best part of the fun was that the purchases had to be made invariably in secret. Did Madame la Comtesse find out; did Mlle. Armor, Mlle. Constant, Fräulein Schwann, Miss Tabor, Miss Davenport know—the fat would be, according to a vulgar expression, in the fire. The only person in the school whom the girls were not afraid of discovering their secret hoard—their secret indulgence—was bright-eyed, merry Mlle. Suzanne. The fact was Mlle. Suzanne had found out long ere this all about Citoyenne Pelven. She even knew the exact hour when the portly figure of the good dame would appear at the back of the big summer-house. Yes, Mlle. Suzanne knew; the girls guessed that Mlle. Suzanne knew. In consequence

they adored her, and Mlle. Suzanne was wise enough to keep her peace.

"What matters it?" she would whisper to herself. "The poor, poor *chéries* must have their fun. It is surely not wrong to eat of the luscious cakes and the melting tartlets, and the stupendously delicious chocolates and bonbons. The young girl will be the young girl all the world over; and then besides it helps Citoyenne Pelven—it makes to a great extent the living of that poor woman. I—I say not a word. I walk through this little simple mystery with my finger metaphorically to my lips."

On the morning after the arrival of Joyce Selby, Citoyenne Pelven took extra pains with her basket of good and delicious things. She guessed that according to invariable custom there would be a feast —a large and sumptuous feast in the great attic which ran across the entire top of the old house. To make a fête on the arrival of a new girl was the custom at La Chapelle. It appealed mightily to Citoyenne Pelven, and she filled her basket accordingly. By-and-by she was joined by Genette Moneta, Muriel St. John, the young Comtesse Caterina Mori, and three or four others. They all brought money and were all in a state of suppressed excitement.

"It is to be a very great feast to-day, Citoyenne," said the Comtesse Caterina, speaking in her rapid fluent French. "We want much, very much. Hark, listen, Citoyenne. We want ALL the contents of that

big flat basket of yours, and even that is not sufficient. You must send us round, or bring yourself, further supplies. Let me consider. Two dozen of these cherry cakes, four more boxes of the good, good bonbons, one more box of chocolates, with the cream inside; and then, in addition, quite a dozen more tartlets filled with the very best strawberry jam. Do you comprehend, Citoyenne Pelven?"

The eyes of the Frenchwoman glittered with joy.

"I absolutely comprehend," she said, "and will faithfully obey. I return to my good Pâtisserie now to prepare the fresh dainties. Ah, ma *Foi,* but they will be of the most superb. I will myself bring them this evening—when the night is falling over the land. I will bring them to *this* spot—behold this great laurel tree!—and hearken, *mes cheres Demoiselles*—the basket shall rest under the laurel, but pour Moi—Citoyenne Pelven—*I* will disappear. It might mean possible danger for me to be present—there are eyes that see, and ears that hearken—for me—I will make myself scarce. You can pay the poor Citoyenne to-morrow morning for the fresh dainties, for that money is as the bread of life to her, my children. Pay me *now* for the contents of this lovely basket; and for the fresh things, to-morrow will do.

"Ah, but surely you are going to have a fête of the very greatest."

"Hearken, Citoyenne," called out Genette. "We must have, in addition to the fresh good things above

named, half a dozen bottles of thy best *sirop*. Send different sorts, kind Citoyenne."

Citoyenne Pelven smiled broadly—indulged in a most expressive wink, and then emptied the contents of her basket into the hands of Edmée Leroux and of Juliette de Tournay. She then turned and swiftly disappeared. The girls were prepared for the contents of the basket; and these delicacies were now placed in a deep brown hamper and hidden under the thick, low growing laurel tree. This being done, the Italian girl, Imelda Olivetta, rushed after the Citoyenne and placed a certain sum of money in her fat hand. Citoyenne invariably waited for this money on the edge of the plantation which divided the School of La Chapelle from the high road. Then Imelda returned to her companions. She was panting slightly; she said in her pretty hurried French:

"We shall have of all things sufficient. The fête will be a great one, for the occasion is worthy."

"At what hour is the fête to be held?" suddenly asked the Comtesse Caterina de Mori.

"Why, of course," replied Muriel St. John, "it can only be at the usual hour, namely, twelve of the clock to-night. The teachers are all soundly asleep at twelve. I have given secret invitations to the thirty girls who belong. We must glide carefully up the broken stairs, and on the stroke of twelve enter the great attic, and voilà! the fun will begin."

"Suppose we are discovered?" exclaimed Edmée Leroux.

"Ah, *non, non!*" cried the Comtesse Caterina de Mori, "*ce n'est pas possible!* Mesdemoiselles, I want to whisper a secret to you. It is a vital moment for us and our scheme. Madame la Comtesse de Trés is afraid—very mightily afraid—of the great front attic. She says there are rats. She would not visit the attic at midnight for anything. I know what I am saying, *certainement, oui.* She says that she dreads the rats; and I know by her face that she does not think there are ONLY rats in the front attic. We will not enquire what she thinks, mesdemoiselles. It is best for us to trade on her fears and have our fun."

"That is quite as it should be," exclaimed Juliette de Tournay. "It will be a very great fête—the most *magnifique* we have ever had; and all in honour of Joyce Selby."

"Ah, but—but she is worthy!" exclaimed Edmée Leroux. "It is good," she continued, "that this is a half holiday, for I myself and the Comtesse Caterina de Mori, and you, Gemma Ravella, can help to decorate the attic for our great midnight fête. We will have little candles in sconces, all the candles turned one way, so that if a step is heard on the stairs we can quickly extinguish them. And I have placed in one corner of the attic a bag of potatoes, which Muriel can set rolling—rolling. Nobody knows the rolling of potatoes from the scram-

ble of rats. Ah, but we are safe, quite safe, and we are provided, are we not, Muriel? with means by which to terrify, if it is necessary, but there will be *no step on the stairs.*"

"We have got," said Muriel, speaking in her distinct and beautiful French, which nevertheless had an English accent under its correctness, "we have got to instruct Joyce Selby in the rules of our *Société de Joie.* If she elects to become a member——"

"*If* she elects?" interrupted Caterina in a haughty voice. "Is there a doubt on the subject?"

"No doubt, of course," replied Muriel. "But in any case she must take the vows which demand absolute secrecy—betrayal means that not one girl in the School—at least not one girl who belongs to the *Société de Joie*—will speak to her again."

"That is of the most correct," replied Caterina, and then the girls dispersed, going back to their different class-rooms.

It was the custom at La Chapelle to make a great fuss about a new pupil, and this fuss was made whatever the rank of the said pupil might be. She might even be, in a certain sense, poor, or of no account, like Edmée Leroux, who was the daughter of a wine-merchant in Tourelle, and who had not the privilege of putting "de" before her name. Edmée had entered the school with just the same éclat and ceremony as was vouchsafed to the stately young English Mees, Joyce Selby. Edmée was not the

least ashamed of her father or his trade. She was so good-natured that even the proud Comtesse Caterina de Mori could not help liking her. She liked Edmée as much as she hated Jeanne Gérusez, who had come from *Lyon* and was the daughter of a great silk merchant. Jeanne was slightly disagreeable, and slightly, very slightly, cunning, she had never been invited to join the *Société de Joie,* but she strongly suspected its existence and was only biding her time to find out if that wonderful story with regard to the rats was true. She was, however, slightly afraid of the extreme dignity of Alain de St. Aignan, of Marguerite de Marni, of Juliette de Tournay; and of *all* those girls in the School, she was most in fear of that pretty English girl, Hope Ashley. There was something so honest and fearless in Hope's face, that somehow Jeanne actually expressed it to Edmée she could not possibly get on with her. Jeanne was full of observation, however —quite as much as was Edmée Leroux—and she could not but remark that Hope never spoke of rats in connection with the School; but she was invariably cheerful and obliging, and everyone liked her.

On this particular afternoon, which was made a half-holiday on account of the arrival of the young English girl, Joyce Selby, Hope and Joyce went for a walk after the morning lessons had come to an end. The joyful permission had been given that the English girls might speak English to each other during the half-holiday, while the French girls

might speak either language as they pleased. Hope and Joyce started off for their walk in the best of spirits. The Comtesse Caterina de Mori saw them go; so also did Muriel St. John. The Comtesse gave a little mocking laugh, and turning to Muriel, said:

"I thought the great heiress from Angleterre was to be *your* friend, chérie."

"So she will be," was Muriel's response. "But, *comprenez-vous,* you must give me time. She knew Hope when they were both little children."

"I take," continued Muriel, drawing herself up to her full slender height, "about a week to establish a friendship. I shall commence this evening, when I invite her to accompany me to the *Société de Joie.*"

Caterina tapped her tiny foot and looked impatiently at the tall English girl.

"The most beautiful and the most stately Hope Ashley has refused to join our *Société de Joie,*" she remarked. "She thinks it sinful; *n'est ce pas?*"

"Ah! do not ask me what she thinks," said Muriel in a voice of great impatience.

"*Mais chère* Mlle. Muriel," exclaimed the young Comtesse, "art thou indeed fair to the beloved Hope Ashley? Why dost thou deprive her of her friends? Thou hast taken me from her; thou hast taken Juliette and others from her, and now thou dost wish to take the lovely young English Mees—Miss Selby, who is her own first cousin—from her. Ah! but I

know—I am sure—art thou not of the sort—the most greedy—Muriel St. John?"

"Greedy? *Mais non,*" cried Muriel. "But I have reasons of my own for wishing to make friends with Joyce Selby."

"Ah, bah!" cried the Comtesse, "it is all because she has the *argent.*"

"Nothing of the sort," said Muriel.

"But she has the *argent,*" exclaimed Caterina. "Is it not so, Muriel?"

"I imagine that she is very rich," said Muriel; "but how can riches possibly affect a schoolgirl?"

Caterina remained silent and looked thoughtful. Then she brought out her words slowly, speaking in broken English:

"The demoiselle, Joyce Selby, is also beautiful, with beauty the most rare, and with dignity the most superb. I adore her! She will be adored by every demoiselle in this School. Such adoration must turn her head. Be quick in making thy friendship, Muriel St. John; for soon she will be swept, metaphorically, from thy arms, and—ah, listen! I heard Mees Tabor and Mees Davenport and Fräulein Schwann, as well as Mlle. Armor, all declare that one so gifted as this English Mees, had never come to the School before. Think of it, Muriel—think what it all means. Clever, ah! clever, beautiful, *riche,* and *distinguée.* Ah, but you will have a fight to win the friendship of Mees Joyce Selby."

Muriel's face became very red.

"Shall we go up and prepare the front attic for the *Société de Joie?*" she said. "The other demoiselles will be waiting and ready. Edmée must have brought in the provisions by now. I will fetch fine linen from my own special trunk, and we must step softly. All the teachers are out and they don't count; Mlle. Suzanne may be about, but she—she is a little fly, who will never tell because she would fear to tell. Shall we meet, say, in five minutes in the great front attic?"

Caterina nodded and turned away. Muriel flew lightly upstairs to a certain room where the English girls' trunks were kept. These trunks were allowed to be carefully locked, and each girl possessed her own key or keys. Muriel now took from the depths of one of her trunks about a dozen bright tin sconces, a little packet of coloured wax tapers, a large white tablecloth of the finest old Irish damask, a roll of green baize, and a piece of crimson silk, which, deftly arranged, was to make a centrepiece. She came out of the box-room with her hands full, looked carefully round her, and then perceiving no one in sight, dashed swiftly upstairs to the great front attic. The attics of the old house had been altogether deserted since the nuns had left, even the servants refusing to sleep there—each of them making the invariable excuse that there were rats, but each of them believing that there was *something* else. It was whispered in the School, and Muriel had set the whisper going, that the Mother

Superior whose bones lay buried near what had once been the altar in the little old chapel, walked these attics at night. As a matter of fact it was Muriel herself, who, having cleverly and carefully copied the dress of an old French nun, glided once or twice across the boards and partly down the somewhat rickety stairs. She had found this disguise most useful. It kept prying eyes away from the attics, and enabled her and certain of her companions to have their fun. She kept her disguise in an unused cupboard in the front attic, and was careful on no account to use it except in an emergency. Even Hope Ashley, who used to be her constant and devoted friend, knew nothing whatever of this, nor did Constance Wheeler, who was a whole-hearted, good-natured English girl, not in the least inclined for midnight pranks, but Muriel delighted in them.

As she rushed upstairs now to join her chosen companions and to make all due preparations for the fête of the *Société de Joie,* she thought herself unseen. But Jeanne Gérusez had peeped out of a recess and glanced after her, had nodded her wee little French head knowingly, and then went off to look in vain for her chosen friend, Edmée Leroux. But Edmée belonged to the *Société de Joie,* and was busy in the great attic. Soon the girls who were on the committee, as it was called, had completed their preparation. A table composed of a long board, supported at either end by trestles, was placed in the centre of the room. On this table Muriel first

put her thick baize cloth, then her lovely white Irish linen tablecloth, then her crimson silk centre-piece. Finally the sconces were arranged at intervals down the long table; tapers were securely fastened into each; a box of matches was left handy; and the contents of Citoyenne Pelven's large flat basket were placed here and there on little coloured paper dishes. The whole effect was at once bizarre and even striking in the wide low room with its sloping roof and its tiny windows. In its centre a long table groaned with dainty food. Round the table Muriel, Caterina, Genette, Juliette, Edmée, and others, placed benches, broken chairs, and other makeshift seats. The final act was to fasten dark green curtains against the two low windows. The Comtesse Caterina de Mori and Muriel St. John, who both undoubtedly took the lead on this occasion, gave Edmée Leroux and Genette Monita explicit directions with regard to securing the rest of the provender, and in especial the *sirop,* which were all to be carried up to the attic and placed carefully at one side of the room during the course of the evening. All preparations were at last made; Muriel walked to a corner of the room, raised the little bag of potatoes, by which she was able to simulate the noise of rats running quickly, glanced at the cupboard which contained the disguise of the poor Mother Superior, and then with a light laugh turned to Caterina de Mori and put her hand through her arm.

"All is in readiness at last," she said, "we shall have a great fête to-night."

"Ah, *oui, chérie!*" cried the Comtesse, "it will be truly *magnifique.* Thou art a genius, Muriel St. John."

But as the two girls, still arm in arm, approached the lower part of the great old house, the Comtesse said with the faintest touch of irony in her tones:

"Thou clever Muriel, I will believe in thy friendship for the English Mees who holds in her possession the *argent,* the beauty, the dignity, and the great, great genius, when—and *only* when—I behold it."

"In one week you will behold it, Caterina de Mori," said Muriel with a flush on her face.

CHAPTER III.

JOYCE.

It had been so arranged perhaps by accident, perhaps by design—no one can quite tell about these things—that Joyce Selby's little bedroom—in other words the old nun's cell, which had been arranged for her in the English girls' dormitory—was situated next to that of Muriel St. John; whereas Hope Ashley's tiny room was at the extreme further end of the great dormitory. On the night of her arrival Joyce looked round her in some bewilderment, wondering how she could ever reconcile herself to so cramped a space, to so plain and severe an apartment. But Joyce was by nature a girl who made the very best of circumstances; and she did not utter a word of complaint, nor even remark to her schoolfellows that her room was minute and terribly plain, and just a wee bit depressing. Joyce had come, it is true, from a luxurious English home, situated in the very best part of that shire famous for its beauty—Warwickshire. From the old battlements of the ancient castle which would one day belong to her, she could see the far-famed Warwick Castle, and even Guy's Tower, situated in its lonely splen-

dour amidst its dark trees. It had been thought well by her guardians that Joyce Selby, aged sixteen years, should come to a first-rate French School before she took her place in that society which always holds out a welcoming hand to its wealthy young *débutantes*. But Joyce Selby had a nature far, very far, above the sordid and mean things of life. She looked upon the wealth which would be hers when she came of age as a talent to be spent for others—as something for which she must one day give an account. There was also a peculiarity about Joyce. She had such a passionate love for learning for its own sake that she hardly thought at all about her money or her great position, compared to the delight of acquiring knowledge. The great School for the French demoiselles and the English Mees's, the Italian Signorinas and the German Fräuleins—the School which had once been a convent and now went by the name of La Chapelle, the School which had as its principal Madame la Comtesse de Trés—appealed to this young girl. She heard of it from her own French governess, who had received some years' education there. She begged of her guardians to send her to La Chapelle for two years. All necessary arrangements were made. Joyce insisted on having nothing beyond what the poorest girl in the establishment possessed —her future wealth was not to be spoken of, not to be thought of. She would see the world, the French world, for herself. Nevertheless, and in spite of

every care, whispers had got abroad with regard to Miss Joyce Selby; and these whispers had reached the ears, not only of Madame la Comtesse but also of Mlle. Armor, Fräulein Schwann and other teachers in the School. Even gay, bright little Mlle. Suzanne had heard of the riches of the new English girl, and in ecstasies had whispered a word here, and nodded a bright look there, which gave Joyce's little secret more or less away.

Hence the excitement and the great fuss with regard to her arrival; hence the half-holiday; hence the special *dîner* in Madame la Comtesse's *salle à manger;* and hence above all things, amongst the committee of the *Société de Joie,* for the midnight fête. The young committee resolved that they must secure this rich English Mees as a member of their Society; they must bind her by their rules and get her to take their vows. Muriel was the person who was entrusted with the task of securing the new member; but the supposed new member herself knew nothing whatsoever about it. After a walk with Hope, after the delightful conversation between the two friends, one or two eager, curious girls had seen the beautiful English Mees approaching that room which was set apart for Madame la Comtesse. This room was on the ground floor, almost exactly over the old chapel—that old chapel which was now deserted, and which only the most inquisitive of the girls ever visited. Madame la Comtesse had arranged her private room in purely French style.

White satin papers were on the walls; the large doors were painted a dazzling white; mirrors, many in number, were placed here and there; small water-colour drawings in the style of the newest French painters were suspended from rails which ran round the top of the walls. The lounges, the sofas, the chairs, were stiff and comfortless. There was the invariable white stove to warm the room. The floor was parquetted and highly polished, and here and there were great rugs—some rich Persian, some Turkish, some again of Parisian make. Madame always held herself severely erect. She was a tall, slender woman of close on forty years of age. She wore a little French cap formed of lace as fine as a cobweb. Her dress was flowered black silk with a long train; the flowers were made of all colours—roses, carnations, honeysuckle, and even heliotrope. Madame wore openwork stockings and small high-heeled shoes. On her tiny hands were placed little delicate French lace mitts. She might be indeed the *châtelaine* belonging to one of the Castles which used to be held so proudly by the *ancienne noblesse* of La Belle France. Her eyes were dark and piercing, her features aquiline, and her hair, still black as jet, was raised above her lofty brow on to a high pillow, on which again the exquisite little French cap was placed. Altogether no one could look more dignified or worthy than Madame la Comtesse, the head of the great School. Joyce saw in a moment that she was in the presence of a great lady. She

had not recognised this fact so keenly on the night of her arrival, but now it was all too apparent. Her cheeks flushed with pleasure. She could appreciate a lady, being one in the best sense of the word herself. She made a swift graceful curtesy, and then stood gravely before her Mistress.

Madame looked her swiftly all over. It is the gift of a Frenchwoman to take in all details at a glance. Madame was pleased—nay, delighted—with her young pupil. She could speak English as fluently as French. As she looked straight into Joyce's eyes—so dark, so fascinatingly bright—she felt something stir within that frozen member which she called her heart. Madame was a woman not easily moved to emotion, but the sweet, noble, beautiful face opposite to her, joined to the knowledge of the girl's wealth, of her extreme beauty, and—according to the teachers, both English and French—her very remarkable talents, caused her to feel that flutter of the heart-strings which she had not experienced for many a long day.

Madame now said softly in the English tongue:

"I beg of you to seat yourself, Mademoiselle; it is a pleasure to me to see you in my *salle*."

"I felt I must come," replied Joyce, speaking in low and yet somewhat rapid tones; "for I want to beg of you, *chére* Madame, to—to beg of you a *very* great favour."

"If it is possible, my child, it is granted," replied the Comtesse.

"Then, Madame, I know your cleverness, and above all things I trust to your wisdom. It pleases me to be a member of your School. I have come here with an object—very direct and very sure. I want, Madame la Comtesse, to learn all I can. I love music, and I want to be instructed in the best possible manner in that most noble art. I think I can sing, and I should like to have my voice trained. As to French, I know it a little already, but I want it to become as my native tongue. I want to become friends with those of your French demoiselles who will care to accept my friendship. An English cousin of mine, I find to my intense delight, is already here—Hope Ashley. Hope and I have known each other since we were babies. Hope and I must always be the very closest friends. I want, in short, dear Madame, to learn all—yes *all*—that your School can impart to me; for I—I thirst for knowledge."

"Your words are admirable," said the Comtesse. "They shall be attended to—yes, unto the letter; but——" she paused and fixed her glowing black eyes on the beautiful face of the English girl—"you have not come here," she continued, "only to say those words to me—Mlle. Joyce Selby—for such admirable words as you have spoken could be conveyed to me through Mlle. Armor, or Miss Tabor. There is something else—something at the back of your head."

"Ah, Madame, you are very wise," said Joyce, a

brilliant smile lighting up her face like a sunbeam. "And if you will allow me, I will speak plainly."

"Plain words are seldom allowed between a pupil and her principal," remarked Madame. "But I permit it, Joyce. Notice that I call you by your pretty name alone, quite alone. I permit that you speak to me absolutely from your heart."

"Thank you very much indeed, dear Madame. What I have come to say is this: it has been rumoured in the School—how, I do not know—but it has got abroad that some day I shall be rich. Now, Madame, will you please attend. Above all things on earth, I do not wish that rumour to spread or in any sense to be acted on. I wish, Madame la Comtesse, to be treated exactly the same as whatever demoiselle in your School is the poorest and the lowest in rank. I wish this most earnestly. I do not want my English affairs to be spoken of. My friend, Hope Ashley, knows about them, of course; and you, Madame, know something—though, perhaps, not quite all; but others have caught the fatal words—that I am rich. In this School I choose to be poor—*poor*. Then, and then only, I can take my rightful place—my true position as I *myself*, Joyce Selby, a young girl who would like to be good if she can be good, and to acquire knowledge *if* she can acquire knowledge. Will you help me in this matter, dear Comtesse? Will you give me your advice, your confidence? And will you sup-

press the whispers which are fatal to my real happiness in your School?"

Madame la Comtesse looked in unbounded astonishment at Joyce. She rose suddenly from her seat.

"So you really wish to hide one of your great gifts," she said. "I respect you for the desire; and if I can—and I believe it is possible—I will help you. But do not for a moment imagine, Joyce Selby, that it is in you to sink to a low level in this School. For you have—ah, they are great gifts!—beauty, dignity and genius. You will hold your own, and you must do so for the sake—for the sake of your beloved Angleterre and the home of your fathers."

"That—that I can manage," said Joyce. "Thank you from my very heart, Madame; all that follows will be easy."

The girl made again a profound curtesy, but Madame took her little hand and, raising it to her lips, kissed it.

"Thus we seal our compact, Joyce," she said.

Joyce immediately afterwards left the room. Madame la Comtesse was left alone, wrapped in deep meditation. After a minute she sighed.

"Ah!" she muttered to herself, "how truly noble, how altogether *charmante*. I could love her as a daughter. Since my own only child died I have never been so drawn to anyone. If I can manage it, it shall be as she wishes. There are girls in this School who would cringe, ah, bah!—CRINGE before

her wealth. But not one of them will dare to cringe before her superb young beauty." Madame went to a bell, rang it, and asked that Miss Tabor should come to her. The lady and her favourite English teacher had a few very earnest words together. Then Madame continued her vocations for the day just as though nothing special had occurred.

Joyce felt a good deal relieved by her interview with Madame la Comtesse; and when in the course of the evening Muriel St. John sat down by her side, and began to display all those fascinations which to a great extent she possessed, Joyce was grave, dignified, polite and perfectly pleasant to her. But try as she would, and Muriel poked very hard, she could not get one allusion from Joyce Selby with regard to her English life and her English home. On the contrary Joyce so plied her with questions with regard to the School and the methods of work, that Muriel soon found that she could scarcely edge in a word. Joyce said quite simply:

"I want to know where I am; I want to know everything. Then I shall be able to get to work, for it is the one thing I love."

"And it is the work that I hate," replied Muriel, fixing her large pale blue eyes on the dark glowing ones of her young companion. "But why should you ask me about these matters? Surely Hope can tell you."

"Hope has told me a good deal," answered Joyce.

"But I want to see things from several people's point of view."

"Ah," said Muriel, "it is true then that you are clever as well as very rich."

Joyce made no sort of reply. She gazed with a pleasant expression on her face straight before her.

"I wonder if she is deaf?" thought Muriel somewhat angrily—"this English heiress and beauty!"

Muriel thought over this possibility for a moment, then changing her tones, she said quietly:

"You must have been greatly surprised to see Hope last night."

"I was."

"She is a very great friend of *mine,*" said Muriel.

"Yes?" replied Joyce, in a slightly interrogative way.

"A very, very great friend," repeated Muriel. "And you," she added, "have you known her long?"

"For the greater part of my life."

"You are cousins, are you not?"

"We are."

"Then perhaps you lived in the—the same Castle?"

"We have never lived in the same house, Miss St. John, until now. It is a very great pleasure to find her here."

"Do you know," said Muriel impulsively, "that at School—more particularly amongst the English girls—we call ourselves by our Christian names.

May I be Muriel to you, and will you be Joyce to me?"

"If it is the custom, of course," said Joyce.

"It is the invariable custom; and," continued Muriel, "I should like to beg for something now. It is this. Can we not—two English girls—be friends?"

"I hope so, Muriel," said Joyce very gravely.

"But I mean special—most special friends?"

"Ah," replied Joyce, "that takes a long, a very long time."

Muriel felt her face flush. She heard a low, smothered laugh; and looking quickly round, saw that Jeanne Gérusez was crouching in a corner, pretending to be absorbed over her French book. Muriel spoke to her rapidly in French. Jeanne said:

"I laugh because of the funny, funny words, in my most charming book." Then hunching up her high, broad shoulders, she walked rapidly away.

Muriel turned with her angry face to Joyce.

"That is the girl I hate most in the School," she said. "She has no right to be here. She is only the daughter of a silk manufacturer at Lyon."

"But surely that does not matter," replied Joyce.

"Not matter?" cried Muriel "Why, she is not a lady. She is without '*de*' before her name. It is true that Imelda Olivetta and Gemma Ravella are also without '*de*'; but their ancestors are Italian, and they are quite, quite charming. You will meet them to-night, Joyce. Adieu, for the present."

CHAPTER IV.

A SURPRISE.

All was in complete readiness for the *Fête de Joie*. Nothing had been left undone. Even the sconces had been privately lit from the box of matches—a match applied to each little wax taper until a glimmering soft light pervaded the long make-shift table. The *Société* up to the present numbered thirty girls, all of whom had been most carefully selected by the young Comtesse de Mori, by Imelda Olivetta, and in especial and above all things by Muriel St. John. Edmée Leroux, although she was not of the same high rank as her companions, was so useful, so eager, so unselfish, that she was admitted into membership, and there were few girls more valuable to the *Société* than the bright, eager young Edmée. Edmée was most careful never to breathe a word of the fact that she was a member of this great secret society. Even if her friend, Jeanne Gérusez, pressed her hard, she could not get even the ghost of a murmur of the true state of things from those firm young lips. All in vain! Jeanne even tried to employ guile, promising Edmée that she would invite her to Lyon in the sum-

mer and show her all the delights of that busy town of mid France. She even went to the extreme length of promising Edmée a piece of the very best silk for a dress, that famous silk which her father made in his great and thriving works. Still Edmée was firm, and Jeanne gave her up in despair, determined, however, to get at the secret, whatever it was, if not by guile yet in some other manner. Jeanne, however, had some difficulties to contend with. If Edmée, notwithstanding the fact that she had not "*de*" before her name, was a general favourite with English, French, German and Italian girls alike; with English and French teachers alike; poor Jeanne was invariably in the black books of eager young pupils and enthusiastic teachers. Nevertheless, Jeanne was, if she was nothing else, very cunning, and she resolved, like the patient cat who watches the mouse, to bide her time.

With what ecstasy she had listened to the grave and stately replies of Joyce Selby to Muriel St. John. Oh, if only she could have such a girl as Joyce for her own friend, then indeed she might snap her fingers at the rest of the school. But now the hour of rest had come. Teachers and pupils had said *bonne nuit;* the French, German and Italian girls had repaired to their dormitories, the English girls to theirs.

At half-past nine to the moment, the various pupils at La Chapelle were expected to retire for the night. At ten o'clock the electric lights were extin-

guished, and soon after that hour the teachers, French, German and English, went to their respective rooms.

Joyce Selby had not slept very well on the previous night. Her tiny room was strange to her. She was disappointed at not being put into a cosy little bedroom near her very dear friend and cousin, Hope Ashley. She also found her very narrow white bed just a trifle cold. She lay very quiet, trembling a little at the strangeness of her surroundings, but the second night all was different. The girl was really tired, and her head did not rest many moments on her pillow before she was sound asleep. Once more she was back in old England, in the lovely home where she had spent all her young days; in the luxurious bedroom, which was filled with her most private possessions. She forgot the French school, the French girls, the English girls, even Madame La Comtesse, even her dearest friend, Hope Ashley. But suddenly in the midst of her placid dreams, a hand, light as a feather, was laid on her shoulder. Joyce started and became immediately wide awake.

"I come to you with a most urgent message, Joyce," said the silvery tones of Muriel St. John. "I want you to come with me at once. Put on your very warmest dressing-gown. Ah, a tea-gown is better—I see it hanging on the wall. It is wadded throughout. That will do perfectly. The night is not cold. It is too early for cold weather yet. You

will slip on your stockings and your little fur slippers. Come immediately, Joyce, I beseech of you, for the summons is most urgent."

"But what is it?" said Joyce. "Is anything wrong?"

"No—no, everything is right—more than right—joyful—most joyful. But my beloved new friend, you will tread softly; you will come at once."

"I don't understand you, but I suppose I will come," said Joyce.

"Speak low, I beseech of you," murmured Muriel. "Do not whisper a word to the uninitiated. Ah, now you are dressed. Are you certain you will be warm enough. Here—I will bring this. This will secure you against chill, and it will suit you, *chérie*—it will fit your magnificent dark beauty."

As Muriel spoke she caught up a crimson cashmere shawl, took Joyce's little hand and whispering again in her ear, "not a word—not a sound; follow me and tread softly," she led the bewildered girl down the greater length of the long corridor, past the tiny room where Hope slept peacefully and unsuspiciously, past the further room where Fräulein Schwann snored most audibly; and then, unhasping the great door, which had previously been well oiled for the occasion, stood with her young companion on the broad landing without.

Joyce felt inclined to be a little restive. What could this mean? What was the matter? Suddenly she heard flapping sounds, something like those

made by bats' wings in summer, and, getting more accustomed to the gloom, for the night was a dark one, perceived that several girls in different shades and degrees of *déshabille* were all flitting past them and going up some narrow, steep and partly broken stairs.

"Come, come," said Muriel, "we will follow."

Joyce, wondering whether she was awake or in a dream, allowed herself to be led up the broken stairs. A minute later a door was flung wide; gay laughter sounded in her ears; and numbers of French, English and Italian girls surrounded her.

"Welcome, thrice welcome—welcome to our new Queen. Welcome to the *Société de Joie,*" exclaimed each eager young voice.

Muriel turned the sconces with a quick movement, so that their light should fall especially and fully on the face of Joyce Selby. She then, without a word, led her to the head of the long table and placed her by her own side.

Meanwhile the young Comtesse Caterina de Mori came softly up from behind and put a crown of bay leaves round Joyce's head.

"Thus we crown our Queen," she said.

As she said the words, she turned and spoke rapidly in French to a group of girls who were standing more or less in shadow. Immediately they all went on one knee, held up supplicating hands, and began to invoke blessings on the new Queen of the *Société de Joie.*

"We will eat now, afterwards we will speak," said Muriel.

"Ah, ah, but I am famished," cried Gemma Ravella.

"And I—and I," exclaimed Juliette de Tournay, Edmée Leroux, and Marguerite de Marni.

"And I also," cried the Comtesse Caterina de Mori. "Good Muriel, clever Muriel, we will eat first and talk afterwards."

As the Comtesse spoke she turned abruptly to the table.

"Gracious Queen Joyce," she exclaimed, "of which of these good things will you partake? Here is *sirop* made from the best last year's strawberries, and here again is *sirop* of the pine—the pineapple, I mean. Here is water from the well, the coldest and purest in the whole of the town of Tourelle. Ah, Queen Joyce, which *sirop* will you take; and of these cakes and tartlets, into which will you set your dainty white teeth? They are all—all of the very best, and made specially in your honour by the good Citoyenne Pelven. Eat, Queen Joyce, eat and drink. We also will eat and drink, glad to have one like you as our Queen."

Joyce Selby looked round her with grave wondering eyes. After the first few startled moments, she was not greatly surprised, nor did she wish, as she expressed it afterwards, to create a scene. The intensely happy faces of the young girls surrounding her, the innocent sincerity of their worship, touched

her in spite of herself. She had by nature a great deal of fun and daring in her composition, and if Hope had been present she might almost have been happy. She tasted, therefore, the *sirop* made of pineapple, and broke a morsel of sandwich of *pâté de foie gras* and put it between her lips. When pressed to partake of chocolates, she also helped herself to one or two, but nothing could alter the extreme gravity of her lovely deep dark eyes.

The French and English girls, satisfied that they had won the great English heiress, that Muriel had been true to her word, gave themselves up with all abandon to the delights of the *fête*. From time to time their eager eyes—brown eyes, grey eyes, blue eyes, eyes of all shades and all colours—were fixed on the face of Joyce Selby. Yes, she would make a glorious Queen. For one whole year she would hold her sovereignty, and during that time much might be done for the improvement and the delights of the *Société de Joie*.

The girls at the lower end of the long table whispered to each other of what might happen in the summertime, when they could feast in the adjacent woods and even each wear her favourite fairy costume. They would each and all imagine themselves fairies for the time being, and this grave and beautiful Joyce would help them.

Hitherto the *Société* had more or less languished for lack of funds, but this would not happen in future, for was not the new Queen wealthy of the



Nothing in all the world could be more dignified and stately than her action.—*Page* 47.

wealthy, as well as—oh, beautiful of the beautiful?

"Yes," said Gemma Ravella, "we will go far this summer when indeed the summer approaches. With such a Queen as we now possess we can do—in fact anything."

The words had scarcely passed her lips before a sudden and unexpected stir at the further end of the long table caused each girl to raise her eyes.

Joyce had sipped a little *sirop,* had eaten one or two chocolates, had munched her dainty sandwich, and now she rose from her seat, gently but firmly removed the crown of bay leaves from her brow and laid it on the table.

Nothing in all the world could be more dignified and stately than her action. She was wearing a very long tea-gown of rich crimson silk. The sleeves were long and wide and fell away from her beautifully rounded white arms. The little collar of old lace revealed the stately column of her young neck. She spoke suddenly, calmly, and collectedly:

"I thank you all very much indeed and from the bottom of my heart, but I have not the least idea what this means. I do not know why you speak to me as Queen. I am not 'Queen' and never could be. It is most kind of you—one and all—to give me such a cordial welcome, and believe me, I reciprocate your kindness, but will you forgive me if I confess that I am sleepy now and should like to return to my bed?"

A few girls at the further end of the attic gave a

howl of discontent and disappointment. The Comtesse Caterina whispered a few words in Muriel's ear, and Muriel, laying her hand very gently on Joyce's shoulder, was about to speak.

Her words were ready and were all prepared for this possible interruption—Muriel had a great deal of penetration of character—and the possibility of Joyce refusing the *proffered* honour had of course occurred to her.

But before she could get in a single word the Comtesse Caterina de Mori had given a preconcerted signal to a group of girls half English, half French, who stood in a little knot at the further end of the attic. All these girls were dressed in the very simplest white. They now came forward—about twelve in number—and suddenly surrounded Joyce Selby.

She found herself standing in their midst in her deep crimson robe, with her black hair falling heavily over her lovely neck and shoulders.

The wild-rose tint grew deeper in her cheeks, and her lovely eyes—so dark, so penetrating—were fixed with an appeal which was almost sorrowful on the young faces which pressed close to her own. She was now far away from Muriel, and in spite of herself this fact made her glad.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a sound at once so solemn, so very gentle, so intensely sweet that Joyce found the tears filling her eyes. For the whole bevy of white-robed maidens were singing—for her and about her.

Their words came to her ears, and sounded to her as about the most lovely and compelling she had ever heard. Who, oh, who had written these lines of welcome—*who* had set them to such entrancing music?

They came out soft and low and could not well be heard outside the great attic.

To you we bow, most gracious Queen,
We greet the lady who has been
First in our thoughts, although unseen.
We ask you now, dear lady fair,
To help us all our joys to share,
To be our comfort everywhere.
We place our crown upon your head,
The upward path with you we tread;
In peace and love, oh, lead us now,
To you sweet lady do we bow;
The roughness will grow smooth with you,
The old sad times with you be new;
Queen, Queen, Queen, we adore you;
Leave us not, we implore you.

The sweet young notes died meltingly away. Joyce, in spite of every effort, felt the tears falling down her cheeks. For quite a moment there was absolute silence—almost indeed a silence that might be felt—then pretty Juliette de Tournay broke the spell—she bent a little forward, took the crown of bay from its place on the supper table and attempted to replace it on the pretty head of Joyce Selby. As she did this the entire soft-voiced choir broke out yet again with the words:

Queen, Queen, Queen, we adore you;
Leave us not, we implore you.

The really lovely words of entreaty had, however, on this second occasion a different effect on Joyce Selby.

She gravely, and with a certain superb young dignity, laid the crown again on the table, at the same instant placing her other hand on the shoulder of Juliette de Tournay. There was a subtle but very real love in this latter movement, and Juliette felt it, as she afterwards expressed, down to her fingertips.

"When she touched me *so*—oh, so—I thought I could have died for her," said Juliette—the warm-hearted, the impulsive, the truly French of the French.

But other things far more important than Juliette's young love were in progress.

Joyce had made her way out of the centre of the white-robed young girls who had sung to her so beautifully and called her *Queen*.

She approached once again the head of the long table where the Comtesse de Mori and Muriel St. John waited for her.

Her voice was absolutely quiet, but so distinct that it could be plainly heard to the further end of the long, low room.

"I do not understand this," began Joyce; "I was sound asleep and you, Muriel, woke me and brought

me here—I, a total stranger received a welcome most sincere and most touching. You have said words to me and treated me in such a manner that I can never by any possibility forget those words and that manner. Is it indeed the custom in your schools of *La Belle France* to receive the stranger as you have received me? I do not know. At least, dear demoiselles, I am infinitely obliged. But there is one thing even greater than your kind words and looks of welcome—you asked me to become your *Queen*—yes, I, a stranger, your very *Queen*—and you joined to this very great and very beautiful request some charming verses—all translated into the English tongue. Oh, I will say so most frankly—I seldom was more touched in my life. It was, I think, partly the sentiment, partly the lovely voices of my young friends, partly their most charming appearance. Now I must say one thing before I go any further. All my life—whether that life be long or short—I shall remember the girls who sang to me, and shall—yes, it is most true—*love them.*"

Here Joyce paused in her glowing words and looked around her.

"I have tried to express my feelings," she said, after that brief moment of silence. "But now it is absolutely necessary for me to leave the land of feeling and enter the land of fact. I do not know anything whatever about your Society; I do not know what you want me to be queen of; I cannot understand why this meeting should be held at mid-

night—indeed, past midnight. You are all dear and sweet, but I do not see my own friend, Hope Ashley, here to-night. Is Hope not well? She would join anything that was really great and noble. Will you, Muriel St. John, and you, Comtesse de Mori, explain these matters to me? I will listen with the greatest attention; I will regard this matter as strictly private. Only permit me to know all—yes, all—before I decide whether I will—whether, indeed, I *can* join you or not, for I may as well tell you now as later, *chères demoiselles,* that my mind is set against all crooked things—that, in short, I want to talk *straight.*"

There was a very slight pause after Joyce had come to the end of her little speech, then again from the very far end of the room rose the lovely refrain:

> Queen, Queen, Queen, we adore you;
> Leave us not, we implore you.

Joyce waited in a listening attitude until the sweet low notes had died away. At last there was absolute silence in the long atic. The thirty girls who formed the *Société de Joie* were waiting in an attitude of intense expectation; all eyes were fixed on Joyce. Her expected arrival had long been commented on. The fact of her wealth had been thought of—thought of with intense approval—but at this moment, as she stood gravely facing them in her long, crimson silk robe, it might truly be said that

there was not one young girl present who gave the supposed riches of Joyce Selby a thought; for there was something about Joyce herself which singled her out as something very rare, very beautiful, very precious. In short, these young girls regarded her as a leader. She should be *their* leader. Why did not Muriel speak? Why did she not quickly and at once explain to Joyce what was expected of her.

The maidens in their white dresses clustered very close together—the rest of the girls were dressed more or less in what they were pleased to call "tea-gowns" of different shades and colours. Some were badly attired, some were dressed with extreme care. The young Comtesse de Mori, for instance, wore a tea-gown of long, golden brown velveteen. But Muriel, her companion and friend, was clothed from head to foot in the palest shade of blue—a sort of faint, forget-me-not blue, which added to the colour of her large blue eyes and brought out the gold tints of her masses of flaxen hair. The Comtesse now said a word to Muriel, who, stepping a little apart from the others, turned and faced Joyce.

"You are quite right, Joyce Selby, in wishing to know why I have brought you here; why we have all given a big fête in your honour; and why, above all things, by the unanimous decision of the thirty girls, English, French and Italian, who are here present, we have elected to make you our Queen."

"But Queen of what?" said Joyce. "That is what I want to know."

"Ah, that is what I am coming to. You must have patience, *chèrie.*"

Joyce looked fixedly into the eyes of Muriel, and it seemed to her at that moment, in that dark, dismal, half-lit attic, that she saw clearly the shallow soul which dwelt behind those eyes and controlled the impulses of that heart. There was also a hardness about Muriel, which, notwithstanding her undoubted charm, Joyce could not fail to notice. It seemed to Joyce Selby just then that Muriel herself put her on her guard.

What was going to happen?

Joyce glanced round the great room and noticed the eagerness, the enthusiasm, on most of the faces. She felt she must not look too earnestly or too closely at these demoiselles. She must fix her eyes on Muriel. Just at this junction and before Muriel had begun to speak, an old expression which had been much used by one of her late father's gamekeepers, flashed across her brain. The man had charge of the pheasants and of the game generally. He had said once in Joyce's hearing:

"Trapped—ah, yes, trapped, poor things!"

A sudden, quick fear filled Joyce's heart. Was *she* indeed also like the poor creatures of the woods —trapped?

> Queen, Queen, Queen, we adore you;
> Leave us not, we implore you!

There could be nothing wrong in words so sweet and innocent. Joyce recovered her flagging courage and looked straight at Muriel.

"The Comtesse and I," began Muriel, "and all the other demoiselles present, belong to a very innocent and yet most charming secret society. Do not, I beseech of you, shrink from those words, Joyce. Secret societies abound in La Belle France. We English and we French girls founded this one some three or four years ago. Our little society we call the *Société de Joie*. Our one and sole object is to revel, to dance when possible, to sing sweet music, to enjoy ourselves. We have made certain rules and in their way those rules are strict. One is that we elect a Queen, who shall superintend the *Société de Joie* for a year. At the end of that time she resigns, and another girl is elected to take her place. The Queen, while she is in power, organises all the movements of the Society. It is she who arranges our different fêtes. It is she who suggests our various forms of entertainment. She is so completely and absolutely our head that we owe her that allegiance which subjects give to a monarch. Her monarchy is absolute, too. Within her small hands lies the power of electing fresh members and of dismissing the unfaithful. When the news was brought to us that you, Joyce Selby, were coming to the School, the time for the election of a new Queen had arrived, and unanimously we resolved to lay this honour at your feet. We have a little book of rules, which is,

however, written in cypher and would have to be read aloud to you, in order that you may clearly understand it—that is, of course, until you learn our cypher. That knowledge can be very easily acquired, Joyce Selby, and I myself and the Comtesse de Mori will have much pleasure in instructing you."

"*Et moi, et moi,*" cried a gay, girlish voice from the furthest end of the room, and Juliette de Tournay, the pretty, black-eyed brunette, made a step forward.

"There will be plenty of girls willing and anxious to help you, dear Queen," continued Muriel. "I do not think there is a girl present who does not rejoice in the thought of your ascending our throne, in the thought of you wearing our crown and being our beloved Queen for the year just commencing."

"Enthrone her, enthrone her!" cried several voices. "Joyce Selby forever, Joyce Selby forever."

Queen, Queen, Queen, we adore you;
Leave us not, we implore you!

The white-robed girls came up again and tried to surround Joyce, but with a slightly imperious gesture, she motioned to them to wait for a little.

"You tell me something," she continued, turning now and speaking directly to Muriel St. John; "you tell me of an innocent society—its name surely implies that—but why should it be *secret?* Why must this most charming fête be held at midnight? If

we are keeping our own rules are we not, *chères demoiselles,* breaking other rules of the great school of La Chapelle? I want to understand about this. Why are the fêtes held in private? Why are they held in the great attic at midnight, when Madame la Comtesse de Trés and all the other teachers are sleeping soundly; when the girls who do not belong to the *Société de Joie* are also in the land of dreams; when, above all things, my special friend, Hope Ashley, is conspicuous by her absence."

Joyce's words were suddenly arrested.

There came a distinct sound—something between a groan of disapproval and a smothered laugh—then the Comtesse de Mori took a long strip of paper out of Muriel's hand and began to read its contents aloud in very refined and perfect English.

"You are quite right, Mlle. Selby," she began, "in wishing to know full and absolute particulars with regard to the *Société de Joie.* It is not wise for any young demoiselle to enter a secret *Société* blindfold. You have not asked to join us, but we—we have craved for your presence. We want a Queen—a Queen to reign over us, and we wish *you* to be that Queen."

"But you know nothing about me," interrupted Joyce at last.

"Ah, *chère demoiselle,*" exclaimed the French girl, "we know sufficient—quite sufficient for our purpose. I have been Queen, Muriel has been Queen, Juliette de Tournay has been Queen. It is

now your turn, English girl, who yet surely must have the blood of Spain in your veins, so raven black is your hair, so dark and deep are your eyes. Our *Société* would not be a *Société* at all if it were not secret—profoundly secret. We trust to your honour, Mademoiselle Selby, whether you join us or whether you do not, to keep all that has passed to-night in your innermost heart of hearts. We want you, *chère demoiselle,* to seal your lips with regard to the *Société de Joie,* and not even to whisper of it to your friend, that fair domoiselle, Espérance Ashley."

"I will repeat nothing," was Joyce's quiet answer.

"Then that is good, very good," replied the Comtesse. "Now we will beg of you to go a step further and to become one of us—to join us, to help us, to strengthen us, to be in very truth our beloved Queen. Ah, you do not know, you cannot guess, what this will mean to the rest of us."

"I have promised secrecy," said Joyce, "and I will simply add that my word is my bond. But before I take one further step in this matter, will you tell me, will *you,* Comtesse, tell me, what are the rules of the *Société de Joie?*"

"I can tell you the principal ones," said the Comtesse, "but when you fully decide to join you will get a full list in cypher, which Juliette de Tournay, Muriel St. John, and I, myself, will interpret to you. In the meantime,——"

"Ah, yes, in the meantime," said Joyce, the faintest quiver of impatience in her tone.

"I can enumerate the principal rules on my fingers," said the Comtesse. "First and foremost, SECRECY—absolute and profound. Second, each member of the *Société de Joie* subscribes *forty francs* per annum to the expenses of the *Société,* but the Queen, *chère Mademoiselle,* is expected to do more. She must subscribe, if she is poor, out of her poverty; if she is rich, out of her abundance. That can be a matter, in your case, for further consideration."

"I thank you," said Joyce.

She lowered her black lashes and looked on the ground.

"The Queen makes all further rules," pursued the Comtesse. "She denies herself for the sake of others. She consults with the Committee with regard to the winter and the summer fêtes. She is profoundly secretive and sends a cypher to each member of the *Société de Joie* twenty-four hours before the next fête. In her hands rest the midnight picnics in the adjacent woods, the fairy dances on the summer sward, the winter meetings in this great attic. Our custom is to have a fête once in three weeks, but that can be altered by any reigning Queen. At each fête plans are discussed, and different modes of enjoyment propounded. Above and beyond all things, we are, as members of our *Société,* all in all to each other. In the hour of ex-

tremity we each help the other. In the hour of trouble, whether financial or otherwise, we assist our sisters to the uttermost farthing. In the hour of pleasure we rejoice with those who do rejoice, but there is one rule very black and very dreadful. It is this: that if a member of the *Société de Joie* lets out even the faintest clue to the existence of the said *Société* to any other demoiselle, or to a teacher, or to our adored Comtesse de Trés, then that treacherous member is cut off from our midst so effectually and so thoroughly that her life in the great school of La Chapelle is made a burden too heavy to be borne. You, in Angleterre, would use the word 'boycott' with regard to this treacherous member. We *act* the word without speaking it. Not one of us addresses the person who has betrayed us. This is our strictest and most terrible rule, and only once since we came to the school has it been put in force. A young demoiselle was forced by our rules to resign. By our further rules we placed her in absolute and awful seclusion. There were thirty of us, and thirty could do a great deal. When she sat next to us at meals we never spoke to her. If she dared to ask us a question, we never replied. If she petitioned for the loan of a book, we pretended deafness; if she looked at us with imploring eyes, we simulated blindness. Thirty demoiselles can do a great deal, and that faithless one left at the end of the term, although Madame La Comtesse de Trés never knew why she went. Now, Mademoiselle Joyce, I mention these

things because I am well aware from your face and also from the words you have spoken, that *you* like openness. Will you or will you not be our Queen?"

Joyce Selby's pretty face had grown very pale—the brightness was clouded in her glorious eyes, and the wild rose tint had faded from her cheeks.

"You have been all very, very good to me," she said. "I feel deeply the honour you want to bestow upon me, but——"

"*Non, non, non,* we will not have you reject our offer," cried numbers of voices at the other end of the room.

> Queen, Queen, Queen, we adore you;
> Leave us not, we implore you.

"I would do anything—anything for you all," said Joyce, looking down the room and replying to the eager impulsive voices; "but this entire matter has taken me completely by surprise. It is neither my way nor my wish to decide in a hurry. What has taken place in this room to-night is—is *sacred.* Mesdemoiselles, when will you have your next fête or gathering? I will be present at it and then tell you, but not till then, my decision. In the meantime I should like to see the rules in cypher, and to be fully instructed therein—not by you, Comtesse de Mori, nor by you, Muriel St. John, kind as you have both been to me; but by one of the other young demoiselles who is even a greater stranger to me. I allude to Mademoiselle Juliette de Tournay."

Immediately on hearing these words Juliette, with a light, tripping movement, ran up the long room, fell on one knee before Joyce Selby, took one of the girl's beautiful little hands, raised it to her lips, and murmured:

"Ah, the delight, the joy, my Queen, my Queen!"

CHAPTER V.

SUSPENSE.

The Committee of the *Société de Joie* chiefly consisted of the Comtesse Caterina de Mori, of Muriel St. John, and of that extremely bright little French girl, Mademoiselle Juliette de Tournay. There were, of course, one or two others, but these three simply led the *Société* through its many and tortuous ways. They were all possessed to a somewhat marked degree of that inestimable quality called *tact*. Muriel glanced for a moment at her friend, the Comtesse; Juliette de Tournay rose from her knees, and, notwithstanding the discontented faces of the greater number of the other girls, who, to put the thing simply, had fallen wildly in love with Joyce Selby, Muriel and the Comtesse forbore to question the young girl any further. Joyce had delivered her ultimatum. For three weeks, therefore, nothing further could be done, that is, publicly.

Muriel said, "We accept in the name of the Committee Joyce Selby's decision. It is the wise, the true and the brave, who think long and earnestly before they undertake what certainly is a pleasure and what may undoubtedly be a duty. On this

night three weeks from now, all the girls here present meet again in this old attic, and then Joyce will tell us what she has decided to do. If she joins us we shall receive her with rejoicing. If, on the other hand, she declines, we—we shall be, oh, bitterly disappointed. Nevertheless, it would be unfair, ungenerous, to visit our very natural disappointment on Joyce. In case she does not join, we have heard from her own lips that she will keep our secret. *Attendez, Mesdemoiselles,* Joyce Selby is not to be pressed, is not to be worried on this subject. She makes her own decision unaided by anyone else. *Cheres demoiselles,* understand, all of you, that those who interfere with Joyce at this critical moment of her career, injure the *Société de Joie* and beyond doubt defeat that very object which they have in view. And now let us forget our possible new member in the delights of the fête—in the story-telling which will follow after, and finally in the dance which will warm our young blood and enable us to go glowing and cosy to those downy nests which have been prepared for us by Madame la Comtesse de Trés.

"Come, Joyce," continued Muriel, turning as she spoke to the girl, "you are not yet a member of the *Société,* although we trust much you will become one, but you are at this moment the honoured guest of myself and my school friends. Sit near me, Joyce —the Comtesse Caterina will be at your other side. Let us eat, drink and be merry, *mesdemoiselles.*

Citoyenne Pelven's excellent confectionery cannot be lightly disregarded, nor her *sirop* of the strawberry and the pineapple allowed to go untasted from our festive board."

These words in Muriel's clear, high, yet rather hard voice were the signal for the thirty-one girls—for Joyce made the thirty-first—to collect eagerly round the board to devour the sandwiches, the tartlets, the cakes, and to mix the delicious *sirop* with icy-cold water from the great jugs which were placed at intervals down the long table.

There were exclamations of pleasure. No girl, perhaps, in the whole world enjoys sweetmeats so thoroughly as does the French demoiselle. To her they are as the bread of life, and when Marguerite de Marni and Juliette de Tournay disappeared towards the farther end of the great attic, and after an interval of from five to seven minutes returned with great jugs of foaming chocolate—chocolate perfectly made, hot and stimulating—the spirits of the *Société* exceeded all bounds.

Each girl allowed to appear from a mysterious pocket in the robe she was wearing a little French spoon and a small and truly French mug. Each of these mugs was now filled with chocolate, but Joyce, who had naturally not made these preparations, was given her share in a cup of silver which the Comtesse Caterina had provided, and which was richly embossed.

The feast did not come to an end until nearly all

the good things had been disposed of. Then followed a succession of stories told mostly in the French tongue. These stories were accompanied in many cases by the low sweet singing of the white-robed choir of twelve girls. At last the final act in the night's festivities arrived, and this act caused Joyce to open her dark eyes to their fullest extent, for Muriel St. John took the little sack of potatoes and set them rolling one after the other on the floor. This performance was executed several times; then the potatoes were put carefully back into their sack.

Joyce longed to ask what this meant, but nobody seemed inclined to enlighten her, and in her present somewhat ambiguous position she felt that she had no right to ask questions. The next moment a girl, tall and graceful as herself, approached her side and begged for the *grâce* of a waltz. The girl's name was Alain de St. Aignan.

She placed her arm lightly round Joyce's slender waist, and a moment later every girl belonging to the *Société* was dancing merrily and with that utter abandon and grace which characterises the maidens of France.

At last the fête had come to an end. Muriel turned to the Comtesse to whisper a few words in her ear. These words were to the effect that, after conducting Joyce to the door opening into the English girl's dormitory, she would come back to pack up all that was left of the feast, to fold and put away her own beautiful damask tablecloth, her own

roll of green baize, her own most effective crimson centrepiece.

In short Muriel, with the aid of the other girls of the Committee, would reduce the old attic to its usual state of desolation. This was one of the invariable rules of the *Société de Joie*. Nothing was left until a future time. All was packed and put away in readiness for future use.

Muriel now took Joyce's cold little hand and ran down the rambling, broken stairs with her. Neither girl spoke a word, but as they approached the neighbourhood of the English girl's dormitory, both Joyce and Muriel saw distinctly a small, dark, rather squat figure huddled together and crouching back as far as possible in one of the many recesses of the old house.

"There is some one there; who is it?" whispered Joyce.

"A fleeting shadow," said Muriel. "Do not speak; hurry on."

They reached the door leading to the dormitory. Muriel with great care and skill unhasped it.

"Step softly," she whispered. "You cannot mistake your own special cubicle. Get into bed. *Dormez bien.* I shall follow by and by."

She left Joyce, who in some wonder and bewilderment followed her instructions. Joyce did go very quietly up the long corridor. She heard once again the snores of Fräulein Schwann; the gentle breathing of her friend, Hope Ashley; the happy sighs and

peaceful slumber which came from several pairs of lips. Soon she had reached the little room which was set apart for herself. She divested herself of the crimson silk robe which she had worn, and hung it once more behind its curtain. She took off her dainty shoes and stockings and crept into bed without making the least sound.

Joyce was, however, very much excited, and for some time found it impossible to sleep. Had she really known what was going on outside the dormitory, the commotion in her heart would have been all the greater. For Muriel St. John, whatever faults she possessed—and doubtless those faults were legion—was also brave.

She went softly, swiftly, silently towards the huddled up figure which still crouched in the recess. She laid a hand light as a feather on the arm of this girl. Her voice came low, distinct and very bitter.

"*Spy,*" she said, "detestable *spy!* What are you doing here at this hour, Jeanne Gérusez?"

Jeanne tried hard to laugh, but failed. She would have given the world to scream or even to cry, but there was a tone in Muriel's voice which seemed to run through her, turning her into stone.

"Ah, ah," she said at last. "Do not forsake me—do not be so bitterly angry! Let me join you and yours—yes, you and yours. I can be useful—oh, most useful. Why should Edmée Leroux be of your party and I—I left out?"

"Has Edmée Leroux said anything to you, Jeanne Gérusez?" asked Muriel.

"*Mais non, mais non, chère belle demoiselle,* she would not what you say in the English tongue—*peach!* That is not the way of Edmée Leroux."

"But," said Muriel, still speaking in that intensely taunting tone, "it seems to be your way, Jeanne Gérusez. Now listen to me; now please attend. Why did you stand in that recess to-night? You must have been there for hours."

"Four hours," said Jeanne with a little sob. "And I—I was cold, and when the—the rats came and scrambled across the floor, I was terrified."

"I said you were a spy and not an honest girl," said Muriel. "Now listen to me. Listen attentively. Do you know the meaning of the word *boycott?*"

"Ah, *non,*" cried Jean. "It is a word belonging to the cold, cold country of *Angleterre.*"

"You had better not speak against my native land, you silly demoiselle from Lyon," exclaimed Muriel. "It is just possible that some of your teachers may applaud your conduct, which I doubt not is to interfere—to betray."

"Ah, *mais non, certainement non,*" whispered the French girl. "What do you take me for, *chère demoiselle?*"

"I take you for yourself, Jeanne Gérusez—a demoiselle of the people, one not fit to tie our shoe-

laces. There! I have spoken. Now you can do your worst."

"But—but, dear mademoiselle, I will not breathe a word, no, not a syllable; I only wanted to *know*. I thought, if Edmée belonged, then I might belong."

"Do not attempt to compare yourself with Edmée Leroux," was Muriel's reply.

"Dear mademoiselle, I will not whisper, no, not a word, not a syllable. I will leave things—things as they are. You have no cause to fear *la pauvre* Jeanne Gérusez."

"Fear!" cried Muriel, a withering tone in her voice. "Do you think we fear *canaille?*"

Jeanne felt the ugly red colour flushing into her face. That spirit which had led the French Revolution animated her just now, but she was far too clever not to try to make apparent friends with the English girl.

"I repeat—not a word," she said. "Not a word!"

Muriel stood and considered for a moment. Jeanne ventured timidly to lay a hand on her arm, but Muriel flung the hand away as though it was a mosquito which might sting her.

"Jeanne," she said then, "I have no time nor inclination to argue with you now. You meant mischief when you stood in that recess, and you will declare fully and absolutely what that mischief was when you meet Mlle. la Comtesse de Mori, Mlle. Juliette de Tournay, Mlle. Marguerite de Marni

and myself to-morrow afternoon at a quarter to four of the clock in the old summerhouse. It is of course within the realms of possibility that you may even go to the length of trying to betray us to one of the teachers between now and the hour I have mentioned, but consider, Jeanne Gérusez, consider! Will your word be taken against ours? Have you any single person in this school to uphold you in your spying tale of gossip, in the ugliness of your ugly story? What, after all, have you to say? If we, some of us, broke the rules, why, did you, Jeanne, not keep them? When you were supposed to be sleeping in your little bed in your special dormitory, you rose and stood in that cold recess for four long hours—why? To watch us. Why? Because you would act the spy on us. And suppose, Jeanne, you do tell the little you do know—and that little, believe me, means less than nothing—think of your share of the punishment! You will indeed and in very truth understand for yourself what the English word 'boycott' means. Has anyone, by any chance, whispered to you, Jeanne, of the sad fate of a girl who went by the name of Pauline? I will not tell you her surname, but she could whisper, were she present, of dark days and sad nights. Pauline is no longer present; the suffering was too great. She left. *We* knew why she left. Do you wish to follow her example? I think I need say no more. Meet us in the summerhouse at the hour I

have mentioned—fifteen minutes to four of the clock *to-morrow*. Until then, adieu!"

"Adieu, adieu, I mean not to betray," whispered Jeanne.

"Then go," exclaimed Muriel; "what are you waiting for?"

"I thought—I thought—perhaps, that you would go first."

Muriel gave a low and very silvery laugh.

"I think not, Jeanne Gérusez. I think you will go first."

Jeanne immediately hunched her dark cloak more tightly round her little figure, fled down the stairs, and was lost to view.

She reached her own special cubicle in her own special dormitory without making the least attempt at a sound. Muriel watched until she was quite out of sight, then returned to her companions.

The great fête of the *Société de Joie* had commenced at midnight, but it was nearly five o'clock on the following morning when Muriel St. John, dead tired and utterly weary, crept into her little cell, flung off her pale blue tea gown, and crept into bed. She was so weary that in a moment or two she was sound asleep. Undoubtedly there were perplexities in connection with the *Société de Joie,* and Muriel's last waking thought was this: *Was the game worth the candle?*

On the following day the school assembled for its usual and manifold vocations. The special treat of

the previous day had now come to an end, and French was absolutely and entirely the only language allowed to be spoken.

Jeanne Gérusez got up with a bad headache. She was subject to these, and they did not improve either her temper or her appearance.

Edmée Leroux, full of good-nature and kindness, noticed the girl's glowering, abject face, and took the very first opportunity to say to her in a low, caressing tone:

"Chèrie, what ails thee, my little one? Art thou suffering from *mal de tête?*"

Jeanne found it convenient to say that she was. She liked Edmée better than any other girl in the school, but she did not dare to confide in her now, for Edmée belonged to that secret source of enjoyment which Jeanne would have given her right hand to possess. Edmée, too, although she was only the daughter of a wine-merchant at Tourelle, had her own ideas with regard to honour and straightforwardness, and could she have even guessed at Jeanne's conduct she would have utterly despised her.

But there was another girl in the school to whom Jeanne might hint things. Oh, of course, she would not *tell,* but to hint would be a relief to her overburdened mind. This girl's name was Françoise Dupuis.

Françoise had not been very long in the school,

and in consequence was glad to make friends with any girl who chose to notice her.

She was the daughter of a Parisian *Avocat* and was ladylike enough; she also had a keen desire for learning. In no way, however, did she belong to the *ancienne noblesse,* and Jeanne felt in her sore little heart—which was just then full of all envy and wanting in charity—that this fact would make Françoise all the more valuable to her in her hour of need.

Yes, she would consult with Françoise; she would make the daughter of the Parisian *avocat* her friend.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FAILURE OF FRANÇOISE.

Citoyenne Pelven was doing what would be called in England a roaring trade. In consequence the broad, red face of the citoyenne beamed alike on friends and foes. It was even whispered at Tourelle that the worthy *citoyenne* had *no* foes—that all alike must respect and like so good and hard-working a woman.

She had of course her rival; but bah! what did a rival matter when *she* held the palm—when *her gâteaux, her chocolats* were beyond doubt the best; far and away the best in the little town. All in vain did Citoyenne Lafarge, who lived at the opposite side of the narrow winding street, try to rival, to outdo the worthy woman—endeavour as she would, it was to Citoyenne Pelven that the surrounding gentry went, leaving Citoyenne Lafarge's sweetmeats for a lower and poorer class of customers. Citoyenne Lafarge hated Citoyenne Pelven, but Citoyenne Pelven would have done her neighbour and supposed rival a good turn if she could.

Neither did Citoyenne Lafarge even once guess at the other woman's secret source of prosperity—

she never noticed when Madame Pelven went day by day with her large, flat basket up a certain shady road; she did not observe when she placed her firm feet on the wires of a closely kept fence and entered a plantation of young trees, and then moved patiently and silently to the back of a great old summerhouse—there to await certain orders which were in fact the sum and substance of her wealth. On the particular morning which followed the great fête, Citoyenne did not fill her basket as full as usual; nor did she—as was her universal custom when the young demoiselles required the best she could give them—put into her basket the freshest and richest cakes. She slipped in a few stale cakes and tartlets on this occasion, for she was wise enough to know that her own special young ladies would not require her services much, if at all, this morning.

As she walked slowly over the grounds, keeping well out of sight of what she considered the prying eyes of the teachers, she suddenly met that small and insignificant girl known in the school as Jeanne Gérusez.

Jeanne, on this occasion, was looking her worst and feeling her sulkiest. "Ah! bah!" thought the worthy citoyenne, "does not *la petite* show only too plainly from where she has sprung—is she not in very truth a daughter of the people? And why not—why not? Do not I myself also belong to the people? Do not I belong to *Liberty, Fraternity,*

Equality. And yet—Ah! *mais oui!* I must whisper it to my own heart, for I dare not breathe a word to *mon frère* or to *mon Mari,* that *les anciennes noblesses* both of *Angleterre* and of *La Belle France* have a *way* about them. Ah! *oui!* a *way.* They are not greedy of the gold, but they require the best—yes, the very best. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, it is they who put the good *argent* into the pocket of this poor citoyenne. Ah! *c'est vrai—c'est vrai.*"

"Have you cakes and chocolates in your basket, Citoyenne?" asked Jeanne at that moment, in a voice which was full of smothered anger.

"*Oui, ma charmante demoiselle,*" cried Madame Pelven, raising her sharp, dark eyes, and fixing them on the girl's face. "This *pauvre citoyenne* has got fame, has got renown. Does she not live to produce delicacies the most melting—pastry that disappears in your mouth as you touch it, chocolates that cannot be beaten by anyone else in the whole of *La Belle France?*"

"And are you going to visit Madame la Comtesse de Trés?" inquired Jeanne, a sly look creeping over her face.

"Ah, *mais non, ma pauvre.* What does a lady like la Comtesse de Trés want with a poor woman like Citoyenne Pelven? Has she not her own French *chef?* I hear tell that he makes things of—ah! *oui;* of the heaviest; but it matters not to me. I sometimes walk through these spacious grounds,

Mademoiselle, hoping that perhaps one like yourself may deign to look at the contents of my basket. *Voilà, chère demoiselle;* see for yourself of what it consists."

Jeanne, notwithstanding her headache, felt hungry, and the contents of the basket seemed to her very good and appetising. Her father, the silk manufacturer at Lyon, supplied her with abundant pocket money, but she was naturally somewhat close and stingy. This, however, was an occasion when to spend might be necessary. She might also make a friend of Citoyenne Pelven, little guessing, silly child, that she was talking to one of the cleverest, most secretive, and in her own way one of the most faithful women in the whole of France.

"I will buy one or two of your cakes," said Jeanne, "although I do not think it is right for you to come through these grounds, and I could of course report you to Madame la Comtesse."

"Ah, *mais non, chèrie,* thou hast too kind a face, a heart too steeped in feeling, to deprive poor Citoyenne Pelven of the few *sous* which she gets now and then, and that rarely, as she crosses these grounds. Thou wouldst not, *chère demoiselle,* injure a woman who has to put the bread of life into *mon frère et mon mari.* Would you not, *chère demoiselle,* buy a cake or two, and some of these most melting chocolates? Are they not filled with cream, and do they not dissolve in the mouth and pass swiftly over the palate? They nourish, they sustain, they

help to endure those fits of indigestion caused by the *chef* employed by Madame la Comtesse."

As Citoyenne Pelven spoke, she deftly drew her stalest cakes and oldest boxes of chocolates to the fore.

Jeanne, who hoped that by means of the cakes and chocolates she could secure the lasting friendship and confidence of Françoise Dupuis, began to haggle with regard to terms, as was her wont, and an angry war of words ensued between the two. In the end Citoyenne Pelven had her way, extracted her price to the uttermost farthing, and at last supplied Jeanne with her worst cakes and chocolates at a sum which she would not dream of asking for her freshest and most treasured possessions from her own beloved ladies—the Comtesse de Mori and the rest of that dearly loved group.

She did not on this occasion, however, venture to her usual haunt at the back of the summerhouse, but went rapidly in the direction of the plantation. This plantation divided the grounds which surrounded the old house of La Chapelle from the high road. The trees were still young and grew slowly as was their nature in that part of France.

Just beyond the group of young trees was a strong iron fence which was supposed to effectually prevent any intruders from entering the grounds. But *Le Marchande de Pâtisserie* was agile, notwithstanding her great bulk, and had long before this discovered a means of making the iron fence but a stepping-

stone to effect her escape *from* the grounds if necessary, and a stepping-stone *to* the grounds on the occasions when she wished to be present.

Now as she waited by the edge of the heavy plantation, she did not attempt to move, but stood motionless—waiting, watching, listening.

The citoyenne had not long to remain in an attitude of suspense—soon, quick, light steps were heard approaching, and Juliette de Tournay drew near. Juliette looked even more French and more charming than usual on this occasion. Her big black eyes glowed and gleamed, her little mouth was wreathed in smiles; and when she saw the portly form of Citoyenne Pelven, she gave a low, sweet laugh which revealed her rows of pearly teeth.

"*Ah! ma bonne chèrie,*" exclaimed the *Marchande de Pâtisserie,* "it is good for the weary eyes to behold thy sweet face. And were the cakes and the chocolates to thy taste, sweet *chèrie?*"

"They were excellent of the excellent, Citoyenne," cried Juliette. "But see! see!" she continued, speaking in her polished and yet most rapid French, "I bring thee the little bottles which held the *sirop* —so good, so inspiring. Ah! but we had a fête of the most *distinguée* last night; and we owe it all to you, *chère citoyenne*—all, all, to you. Behold the little empty bottles—I will place them here in your basket; surely this corner was meant for them. And chère Citoyenne, behold the good *argent;* I bring it

also—where shall I lay it; so that the fruits of all thy toils shall not be wasted?"

Citoyenne Pelven winked her black eyes and, making a sudden significant gesture, drew from her ample bust a little bag made of soft leather and held it open.

Juliette was about to drop the carefully gathered hoard into this receptacle, but Citoyenne Pelven stayed her hand.

"For me," she said, "I love the *chères belles demoiselles,* but I also love the *argent*—the *argent* so hard to win, so *difficile* to earn. Even before love comes business, for by business this poor *citoyenne* must live. By your leave, Mademoiselle, I will count the coins."

Juliette smiled but said nothing; the rosy-cheeked citoyenne made a quick calculation; her lips moved rapidly as she counted francs and half francs. Presently, with a look of complete satisfaction, she slipped the money into her little leather bag; returned it to its resting place; and turned to depart; but ere she did so, she turned suddenly and spoke a few words.

"Thou art to me, Mademoiselle, as the bread of life. I love thee, and I love thy young companions; but I think it right for thy sake, for their sakes and mine, to utter a word of warning. Behold! it is but a little word. Didst thou ever see a harmless piece of broken twig or stick lying across thy path? Ah! *voilà!* but I have, and it looks like nothing at all. But behold! you come up to it unwarily and—and

most truly it lives; it raises its forked head and looks at you out of its bright and glittering eyes. It is small, that little twig, but yet it is full of danger—in a moment it will spring—ah! spring. Its fangs will strike thee; its poison will infect thee; the little twig has turned into a *vipère.*

"*Chère* Mademoiselle de Tournay, beware of one such in your midst—so innocent looking and yet so full of danger. There! I have said my say. Declare not afterwards that you have not been warned."

With these last words and with an agility amazing in one of her years and bulk, Citoyenne Pelven turned and cleared the fence, looked back and nodded to the young demoiselle, and then began to walk up the long, dusty, straight road peculiar to all parts of France.

Meanwhile Jeanne Gérusez held her cakes carefully in a little basket which hung on her arm and, taking immediate care to cover them with trailing pieces of ivy and some late autumn flowers, returned to the house. The great bell had sounded for *déjeuner,* and the ninety-two girls, with their different teachers, quickly assembled in the great *salle-à-manger* set apart for the occasion.

Madame la Comtesse de Trés did not often dine with her pupils. Miss Tabor on these occasions took the head of the table where the English girls sat. Mlle. Armor took the head of the French table, Miss Davenport was at the foot of the English table, and Fräulein Schwann at the foot of the French table.

Notwithstanding Citoyenne Pelven's remarks to the contrary, the *chef* provided by Madame la Comtesse was an excellent cook, and day after day the girls were regaled with nourishing and delicious soups followed by different dishes, all prepared in truly French style. If there was any preference in the school this was undoubtedly given to the English girls, for Madame la Comtesse was extremely proud of her English connection. But girls, hungry girls, are not over-particular, and all ate on the present occasion with heartiness and appetite, although the young Comtesse Caterina de Mori, Juliette de Tournay, Muriel St. John and Joyce Selby looked rather paler than their wont.

Hope was glad to find that she had secured a place near Joyce, but Joyce was not yet sufficiently fluent in the French tongue to talk rapidly to her friend, and of course no other language was permitted.

Déjeuner—the largest meal of the day—was generally finished before one o'clock, but the young students did not return to their various classrooms until at least a quarter to three o'clock.

The final instructions of the day came to an end at four, and at a quarter to five tea was prepared, according to the English fashion, for the English girls, while the other girls in the school partook of what they called *gouter*. This consisted of a piece of bread and a solid morsel of chocolate.

After these so-called light meals, lessons for the next day were prepared; and at a quarter to eight

of the clock came *le dîner*. This meal was at once both simple and excellent.

At *le dîner* those girls who were invited to visit Madame la Comtesse in her own private *salle* appeared, dressed for the occasion. Madame never asked the entire school to be present at once—she sent her notes of invitation by Mlle. Susanne each morning, and expected her replies not later than eleven of the clock on that same morning. On these occasions she ceased to be the great and dignified Head Mistress, but was the friend, the sympathiser, of each girl present.

The girls so honoured were expected always to appear in *demi-toilette*.

This good, excellent woman took a deep interest in the nightly arrival of her young visitors, and did her very best to make them at home and happy.

At half-past nine a great bell sounded through the vast house, and all the girls, both French and English, passed in single file before Madame la Comtesse; murmured the words, "*Bonne nuit, Madame,*" and entered their respective cells or cubicles.

On the day which immediately followed that of the great fête, Jeanne Gérusez knew that her one sole chance of making a friend and confidante of Françoise Dupuis was to secure that young lady all to herself immediately after *dejeuner*.

The day happened to be mild and fine—one of those summer days in late autumn which come to delight the world before the miseries of winter de-

scend upon it. Each girl in this great school had, as a rule, both an English and a French friend. Those French girls who could not secure an English friend were permitted to make confidences with two girls of their own country. Jeanne certainly had no English girl as her friend. Jeanne was lonely, Jeanne was slightly frightened, Jeanne was depressed.

Suddenly she saw coming alone up one of the long corridors which led from the house to an old rose garden the one demoiselle on whom she had set her heart. François Dupuis, daughter of the Parisian *avocat,* had only very lately come to the school. She was even a greater stranger than was Jeanne.

Françoise was a slim, fair-haired girl, with blue eyes, rather small and set too closely together. She had insignificant features, very slightly marked brows but a determined, although also somewhat sullen mouth. She was the sort of girl who possesses little or no enthusiasm, and little or no imagination. She was rather disgusted with "*mon père,*" as she called her worthy father, for sending her to La Chapelle. She would have preferred a school in the gay capital. She loved Paris better than anything else, or any person in the world. She loved it for its gaiety and brightness. Her father, the *avocat,* had secured a good *dot* for Françoise. By and by, when she was quite grown up, he would also secure a husband for her. She herself would not be consulted; she would have no say whatever in the mat-

ter. As likely as not she would never see the man she would espouse before her marriage day, but afterwards she could go about and enjoy herself like all the other young French Mesdames.

In France a demoiselle could do nothing, but a young madame had the world at her feet.

Françoise's idea of the world was not lofty. She would frequent the theatre and the opera. She would spend lots of money on her clothes, she would richly endow herself with sweetmeats of all kinds and descriptions. For the rest, she threw up her expressive French hands—for the rest, nothing mattered.

This school of La Chapelle was deadly dull, but *mon père*—she could not move *mon père*. She must stay here for one, two, perhaps three years. Afterwards the fun would begin.

As Françoise now emerged into the open air, she was met face to face by Jeanne Gérusez. Jeanne greeted Françoise with an eagerness and affection which surprised her.

"I have been waiting for you, *chèrie,*" she exclaimed; "I have been wanting you with a great hunger. There is a little bower—oh, not the great summerhouse"—Jeanne shuddered as she spoke of that—"but a cosy, cosy bower, *pour deux,* close by. We have more than half an hour; we have indeed three-quarters of an hour. Come with me, *chèrie,* to the bower, *pour deux.* You behold in me one in trouble. May I confide in you one little bit, *chère demoiselle?*

"Oh, and I have got chocolates and cakes. I bought them this morning from the most charming *pâtissière* in the whole of Tourelle."

The eyes, the small blue eyes, so closely set, of Françoise Dupuis, glistened with a sort of greedy pleasure. She was not the least interested in Jeanne, and Jeanne's trouble was assuredly not her trouble, but the chocolates and the cakes, they were quite another matter.

"I will come with you if you wish it," she said. "I suppose you know, of course, that it is wrong—I mean it is against the rules—to buy cakes and chocolates from any citoyenne who lives at Tourelle?"

"It matters not," said Jeanne, flinging out her hands, "and rules, have they not been broken every day and all day long? Do not talk to me of rules, Françoise. It is because of rules that I am in trouble. But eat, Françoise, eat while I explain."

Françoise was abundantly willing to fall in with this arrangement. She had a perfect passion for sweetmeats. Jeanne, seeing her absorbed in devouring the *chocolat à la crème* and the little cakes which were a trifle stale, confided in her a certain portion of her own trouble—not by any means all, for that she would not dare to do, but sufficient to arouse the interest of the Parisian girl, who even forgot her chocolates as she listened to Jeanne's story.

"So you really, *really* stood in that dark recess

last night for four long hours," said Françoise; "and you heard with your own ears the patter, patter of the rats. Ah, *pour moi,* I *hate* the vermin. And then—then you were accused by a demoiselle whose name you will not mention, of being such a low thing as a *spy.* But I ask myself this, Jeanne, can one be a spy if there is nothing to spy about? You feel confident that there is a secret."

"I am—quite confident."

"Then it is your duty, your bounden duty, to tell Madame la Comtesse de Trés."

"I would not dare," said Jeanne.

"But I would dare," remarked Françoise. "Thank the *bon Dieu!* he has made me without fear. If I were to enlighten Madame la Comtesse, she might, on her part, do some things for me in the school—I should be in her eyes a heroine. I think that it is worth the trial, and it is most truly the only thing to do."

"*Mais non, mais non,*" exclaimed Jeanne in great distress. "I told you in confidence, and remember it is *my* secret, not yours. Françoise, you dare not betray me, and as to your being a heroine with your mistress after telling a tale that is scarcely likely—for Madame positively *hates* hearing tales out of school—you do not know, you cannot guess what such a proceeding on your part would mean—to *us* —to ME—and—and to others. Your life and my life would be rendered intolerable. Oh, these demoiselles have ways, have means. Their ways, their

means, are as terrible quite, as the Spanish Inquisition."

"I thought you wanted me to *act*," said Françoise, popping the last chocolate into her mouth. "I am sure I don't want to take up your scrape. You confided in me and when I made the only plausible and right suggestion you threw cold water on it. I do not think I want to hear any more. Thank you for the chocolates. They were good, but I have tasted better in Paris. I can of course act on my own initiative now that you have given me the clue. You will not be blamed. It is I that will, what you call, suffer the pains of the Spanish Inquisition. Bah! do you think I fear your demoiselles from the country, and your dull, cold English mees's? Adieu, Jeanne, I go my own way—I follow my own course."

Françoise without a word glided out of the little sanctuary where the two girls had taken refuge, and Jeanne, shivering from head to foot in real and very great alarm, pressed her plump, but ill-made hands to her aching eyes. Her head was worse, but whatever happened, she must meet her severe young judges at a quarter to four that afternoon in the old summerhouse. Françoise was no good whatsoever; Françoise was bent on mischief. She must tell these girls of the ancient French families, and these other girls of old England, what Françoise might and would do to injure them.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SUMMERHOUSE.

The summerhouse stood at some distance from the old School. It could not be seen from any of the windows of La Chapelle, and was in consequence much esteemed by the different members of the *Société de Joie*. Here the Committee used to assemble for the purpose of discussing plans—of making up programmes for the furtherance of the said *Société*. Other girls belonging to the school had of course perfect right to assemble, if they wished, in this ancient retreat, but, as a matter of fact, the truth of the old saying that *possession is nine-tenths of the law* was proved abundantly with regard to the summerhouse. All girls in the school could go there if they pleased, but no girls did visit the old place except the members of the *Société*. No one had even whispered to them not to go there, but as a matter of fact they did not go. To them there was nothing attractive in the place, which was cold in winter, and full of gnats and mosquitoes in the hot weather.

In short, without making any effort, the *Société* had the house to themselves.

That summerhouse abundantly suited their re-

quirements. It was large and firmly built—no whisper from inside could penetrate to the outer world. There was a wide bench running all round inside the walls which could, if necessary, accommodate quite thirty or even one or two more girls. There was a round rustic table in the centre of the large room; and there were several casement windows which could be shut in winter to keep out draughts, and in summer could stand wide open so as to allow the sweet, fresh air from the adjoining plantations to enter and cool the young occupants over their arduous tasks.

A good many of the girls brought camp-stools with them, and seated on these they could sum up their accounts, drawing the said camp-stools close to the round table for the purpose.

No one saw them, no one noticed them; they enjoyed their seclusion—the secrecy of the place gave them pleasure, for what girl does not love a secret?

On this special day—the day which followed the great fête in the long front attic—the members of the Committee met rather earlier than usual. There were present on this occasion:

Juliette de Tournay, the young Comtesse Caterina de Mori, Miss Muriel St. John, Edmée Leroux, and Marguerite de Marni. There were other members of the Committee who could not attend, but Muriel and the Comtesse were a host in themselves, and no one wished for anyone else when they were present.

The five girls now looked around them with a

certain expectancy. Why had Muriel St. John sent them a special message to be present without fail? As a rule, after a great and successful fête nothing was done, nothing was expected of the Committee of the *Société de Joie* for a few days. They had just gone through a very striking success; surely they might now rest like rowers on their oars.

This was the invariable rule; why was it broken on this occasion? The possibility of Joyce Selby refusing to join their ranks had, it is true, entered the minds of one or two present, but they could scarcely believe that such a calamity would occur to them.

They wanted Joyce for herself—for her young, bright, noble nature. They also wanted her, although this fact they scarcely whispered even to one another, for her reputed wealth.

Now it was an undoubted fact that at this present moment Juliette de Tournay, Marguerite de Marni, and in fact none of the girls present, with the exception of the Comtesse and Muriel St. John, thought anything at all about Joyce's wealth. They belonged themselves, each one, with the exception of Edmée Leroux and Muriel, to the *ancienne noblesse* of France. Of course Muriel was English, but Muriel's people were also well-off and highly-born. Nevertheless both Muriel and the Comtesse desired their future Queen to be rich. The decision had gone forth before the arrival of Joyce Selby on the scene; she was to be invited to join the *Société de Joie;* she was to be made their Queen; and this decision had

been arrived at simply and entirely because of her *wealth*. Would any girls invite a total stranger to accept so high a dignity without a cause? The cause in the case of Joyce was money.

Muriel laid down the law, and the rest of the Committee abided by it. Great was Muriel's influence over these young girls, and in all things was she supported by the Comtesse, who had given up Hope Ashley to become altogether Muriel's devoted friend.

Yes, it was necessary to have a Queen, and a rich Queen, for funds were low. Citoyenne Pelven's *gâteaux* and *chocolats* and *sirops* were not obtained for nothing. There were other and further expenses. The *Société de Joie* could, in short, not be run without funds, and even forty francs a year from each member scarcely supported the ambitions of these eager young girls. In short, the Queen must be wealthy, and she must give of her wealth to so charming, so desirable an object.

All these thoughts passed through the minds of the Committee before the arrival of Joyce Selby, but after her appearance in their midst, after beholding a certain gallantry in her young bearing, after seeing the flash of her dark, very dark eyes, and hearing the clear tones of her lovely English voice, the girls who composed the *Société de Joie* felt that they wanted Joyce to be their Queen, whether she was a beggar or a royal princess in her own right.

In short, Joyce Selby possessed that marvellous charm which is indescribable, and wins all hearts.

"Comtesse," exclaimed Juliette de Tournay, "we are all anxious to know why you and the beloved Muriel have invited us here on this raw, damp afternoon. Have you any bad news, Comtesse?"

"Surely," interrupted Edmée Leroux, "that most beautiful young creature, Joyce Selby, has not in a moment of confidence told you, Comtesse, or you, Muriel, that she will *not* be our Queen, that she will *not* join the *Société de Joie?* Ah, but if such is the case, our hearts will break."

"Talk not in such silly words, Edmée Leroux," cried Marguerite de Marni. "You exaggerate, *pauvre petite.* You are good and we love you, although you have sprung from the people, but remember that the true French lady—ah! and I include the English lady also" (here she bowed with extreme grace to Muriel)—"will not, does not, *could* not wear her heart on her sleeve."

"Allow me to speak," cried Muriel. "The Comtesse and I have invited you here on a very special and very grave matter, but you may at least relieve your minds on one score. That matter has nothing whatever to do with our new member, and I trust our future Queen, Joyce Selby. I know, I assure you, the class of English girl from which Joyce Selby springs. She is true of the true, honourable of the most honourable; and as she herself said last night, her *word is her bond.* She will give us her decision

at our next fête—which fête is to be held at midnight in the old attic on precisely the same terms and with the same *éclat* as accompanied our proceedings last night. We never had a fête quite like that held there last night, but I prophesy, and my friend the Comtesse Caterina prophesies also, that the next fête will be even greater, for we shall then secure our young and gracious Queen. We will crown her with fresh bay leaves and place her on our ancient throne. Of all these things I feel assured. We want her, mesdemoiselles, for her beauty, her dignity *and her wealth.* We cannot, in short, proceed with our delightful fêtes without such aid as she can, and will gladly give us. In the meantime clearly understand our solemn vow—not a word, not a syllable is to be breathed to Joyce Selby on the subject of the *Société de Joie.* She has expressed a wish, however, to see our rules in cypher, and we will depute you, Juliette de Tournay, to read them carefully over to her. Read them once, twice, and even thrice, if she desires it, but be careful not to make one comment, Juliette. If she speaks and asks you questions, you are to refer her to the Committee, who will all be assembled in the great front attic in three weeks from last night. In the meantime preparations must be made for her enthronement. I suggest that she should wear over her lovely crimson tea gown our royal cape of ermine, which we keep so carefully for the enthroning of our Queens, and we will give immediate directions that the twelve maidens in white

shall surround her and sing a fresh song in her honour. But all these things, pray understand, are for the future. You will be given full directions, Juliette, when we think it wise for you to explain the cypher to Miss Selby.

"In the meantime, *attendez-vous, demoiselles?* The Comtesse and I have called you here with good reason—with, alas! grave reason. You know, demoiselles, how we have all loved our innocent *Société de Joie;* how, during all these years, we have kept it a profound secret from outsiders, teachers and girls alike. It has been to us as the heart, the very innermost heart of the school. It has added to our delights, it has sustained our flagging courage."

"The *Société de Joie* forever and forever!" burst from the lips of Marguerite de Marni, Juliette de Tournay and Edmée Leroux. The young Comtesse and Muriel remained silent. Their faces were grave, perplexed, a little sad.

"*Attendez,*" cried Muriel again. "This is what has occurred: Last night—or rather early this morning—as I was conducting Joyce to the door of the English girls' dormitory, we encountered a dark shadow huddled into a recess in the wall. Joyce naturally uttered an exclamation, but I hurried her by, trying to disabuse her mind of the least idea of being watched. Having seen her safely to her room, I went back to the crouching shadow and discovered that snake in the grass, Jeanne Gérusez. Demoiselles, she had been standing there for four long

hours. She said, forsooth, because she wished to *join*—to join *something,* she knew not what. Edmée Leroux, you are supposed to be a friend of hers; do you know anything of this?"

"Nothing," replied Edmée, turning first red and then pale. "I am bound by my vows, demoiselles; I reveal *rien!*"

"I believe you, Edmée," said the Comtesse. "You are of different mettle from that—that——"

Juliette here sprang to her feet.

"Now I understand," she cried. "Citoyenne Pelven was in the grounds to-day, and I went to her as arranged—to take back the empty bottles which had contained the *sirop,* and to pay her for the extra good things which she had given to us. She looked excited, did the good Citoyenne, and spoke of a—a *vipère* in our midst. Now I comprehend what she means."

"Ah, truly, and the word is worthy—absolutely worthy of the demoiselle to whom it is applied," said Comtesse Caterina. "But proceed, Muriel; you have more to say."

"Jeanne said she reared the rats," continued Muriel, a slight sarcastic smile revealing her white teeth. "*Pauvre enfant,* our potatoes did us justice. *Mais maintenant, mesdemoiselles,* I had a slight talk with the young *vipère, n'est-ce pas?* My talk was to the point. I alluded to Pauline. None of us care to talk of Pauline except in moments of great, great extremity. I think the young *vipère* from Lyon was

much impressed, in fact, subdued, in fact, terrified. Demoiselles, I got her under my thumb and I kept her there, and by my express orders she is coming to the summerhouse to-day—now—this very moment, to explain to us her exact reason for standing four long hours in the dark, cold recess. Demoiselles, we must be kind to her, for although she is wicked, she is of the timid of the earth. We must therefore let her down lightly and explain to her, once for all and forever, that she does *not* join us, she never joins us, for she is—oh, unspeakably *canaille!*"

Edmée moved restlessly.

"You forget that at one time she was my friend," was her remark. "Of late I have seen little of her, through no fault of mine. I have wished to be good to her, for she and I both sprang from the people. I, for one, am not ashamed of my ancestors, and I covet not at all wealth or greatness, but I greatly—oh, greatly covet love, nobility, the warm, the true heart."

"*You* are all right, Edmée," said Marguerite in a careless tone. "We have only one request to make of you now—that when Jeanne Gérusez arrives, you maintain a steady and absolute silence, and allow the entire matter to be placed in the hands of Muriel St. John and Comtesse Caterina."

"*C'est vrai, c'est vrai,*" echoed several girls, and just at that moment there came a timorous knock at the shut door of the summerhouse.

Marguerite de Marni herself went to open it.

"Come in," she said, and a scared-looking, hunched up, cross, glowering girl appeared on the threshold. She raised her dim, small dark eyes and looked from one face to the other; then she unwound the black lace scarf which she had fastened round her head, let it fall to the ground, and faced without uttering a syllable her severe young judges.

It was just at that instant that her eyes were met by the kind, sorrowful eyes of Edmée Leroux. Edmée tried to convey from her own face an expression which seemed to say, "I am sorry for you, but can do nothing for you here."

The girls were all seated, but Muriel now rose, pushed aside the round table and began to speak.

"We are waiting to hear your explanation of your very extraordinary conduct of last night," said Muriel. "Will you tell us in as few words as possible?"

Jeanne gave a little gasp. About half a minute's troubled silence followed, during which Jeanne again looked at Edmée; but Edmée on this occasion had her eyes fixed on the ground. Jeanne then gathered up her courage with a tremendous effort and began to speak.

"It began in this way," she said. "I know I'm —I'm not *aimable*"—she cast a timid glance at her young judges, who were all absolutely speechless. "I also know," she continued, "that I am not born high up, but low down. I did not ask for the manner in which I was to be born, and I do not see

how I am to be blamed for it. *Mon père* is one of the richest men in Lyon, and I never wanted for money. He wished me to go to a good school, one of the very best, and he heard of La Chapelle and I was sent here. At first I was very unhappy, for no one took any notice of me and I knew I was neither pretty nor *charmante,* and my wealth was thought less than nothing in this great school of the high and the grand. Then, all of a sudden, I felt better, for Edmée Leroux was also of the people, and for a time she was my friend, but whereas she was pretty and bright and gay and charming, I was always sulky and discontented, and then—then, in some mysterious way, I could not make out why, my one and only friend seemed to have less and less time to be with me, and I began to put my wits together and to—to *suspect.* We French girls are great at that sort of thing, although I am not in very truth what Muriel St. John called me last night—a *spy!* I meant no harm—no, not the slightest. I did not intend to breathe a word of what I suspected to the authorities. I could not but perceive, however, that certain demoiselles were happier than others, and had more fun than others, and I thought I should like to join those girls just as my friend, Edmée Leroux, had joined them. So last night I waited in the niche where the figure of the late Mother Superior used to be, and I—oh, but the hours were long, and I remembered the story of the rats, and I—I heard them, multitudes and multitudes, and I was horribly

frightened. Then there came down the stairs from the attic where the rats have their *rendezvous* Muriel St. John and the new girl whom everyone is making such a fuss about—Joyce Selby. And although I crouched into the very furthest corner of the recess where the figure of the Mother Superior used to stand, both girls saw me. I heard Muriel say to Joyce, 'That is only a fleeting shadow,' and perhaps Joyce believed her and perhaps she did not. Anyhow, Muriel returned before I had time to get away, and she spoke to me—oh, most bitterly, most cruelly. *She* let out nothing of course, but she said *I* was to tell all. Well, demoiselles, I have told all. I earnestly desire to share your secret, and I will be a faithful member and—a *rich* member—oh! very rich. My father does not mind how much I spend, and although I am ugly and plain and common, I have at least got the good money, and I can pour it at your feet. Will you permit that I join your secret—for I really know no more—Muriel St. John and Comtesse Caterina? I will be as a slave to you each and all; only let me join, for it is cold, so cold outside, and I want the warmth and the fun and the companionship. Edmée belongs to you, although she is but a daughter of the people; why should not I also belong, and I am far, far richer than Edmée. I shall have a very great *dot* some day."

"You are talking nonsense," said Muriel. "If you will faithfully, most faithfully promise during all the future days you stay in the school to keep your

suspicions about us to yourself; if you do not ever again attempt to spy upon us; why, we on our parts will do nothing further. We will not punish you as you deserve and as—as you *can* be punished. Were we to take the law into our own hands your life at La Chapelle would be unendurable, Jeanne Gérusez."

"But—but—may I join?" cried Jeanne.

"What do you mean by 'join'?" cried the Comtesse. She spoke in her haughtiest tone and drew herself up so that she looked every inch a Queen.

"Why—why, your *secret,*" said Jeanne, floundering a good deal, and hunching up her square shoulders. "Those things that make you confab and whisper; those things which make you leave your beds at night and cause the—*the rats to come.* Ah, bah! I hate rats."

"You cannot join what you have truly called *nothing at all,*" said the Comtesse. "Be satisfied that you have behaved—well, disgracefully, and that we—well, on this first occasion, forgive you. Leave us alone in future and nothing will happen. Try to penetrate into our innocent conversations and our equally innocent friendships, and you will regret your conduct to the longest day of your life. That is, I think, *all!*"

"Then I am not to join?"

"*Mais, certainement non,* there is nothing to join. Keep to your own set, whisper no word about us, and all will be well."

It was just at this moment that Edmée Leroux

again raised her large dark eyes and fixed them on the face of her compatriot. She saw what she expected to see—a sudden and absolute and complete change sweep over Jeanne's ugly features. It is true that she no longer cringed, but her face, even to her lips, was deadly white with ungovernable passion. She choked for a minute or two, endeavouring to get out words which would not come. Then she said in a low emphatic voice:

"I wish to inform you, demoiselles, that I would have been your friend and would have helped you. But you are cruel; you are proud with that pride which caused the great Revolution many years ago. Through your means I have lost my one friend, Edmée Leroux, but if I have lost her I have gained another. Ah, *oui,* I repeat not her name, but where I am weak, she is strong; where I am fearful and timorous, she does not know the meaning of such words. I have this morning whispered to her a hint of such suspicions as I possess, and she—*my friend*—proposes to enlighten Madame la Comtesse de Trés, Mlle. Armor, Mlle. Constant, Fräulein Schwann, Mees Tabor, Mees Davenport, and the rest of the great staff of teachers. You will perhaps, *chères demoiselles,* tell a different story about your so-called *no* secret, which yet *is* a very great secret, when you encounter the strict investigations of Madame la Comtesse de Trés and her staff. For me, I bid you adieu. You have treated me with great—*great* cruelty, but there is such a thing as revenge, and I,

bah! I *love* revenge. *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!* They are fine words, and they suit me as well as you, demoiselles!"

After saying these last words Jeanne Gérusez, still in a white heat of passion, left the summerhouse.

She scarcely knew what she did, or where she walked, and when suddenly a white hand was laid on her shoulder she shook it off as though she would remove a venomous insect.

A light laugh sounded in her ears and the voice of Françoise Dupuis sounded close to her cheek.

"*Chèrie,* thou hast been a long time in that large summerhouse," remarked Françoise. "For me—I watched you go—such a little timid chèrie! I waited and waited. At last you came out quickly—ah! quickly, and *c'est vrai!* the timid look had vanished for the look of triumph, oh! the most profound; of anger the most regal! What happened to you in that old summerhouse, little friend? Did you indeed win a great victory? Believe me, I long to know all—yes, all."

"Françoise, you are kind," said Jeanne. "I will tell you this much now—this much and no more: I have indeed won *no* victory. Ah! *non, non, far, very far, from that.* But I must not speak even to you, kind Françoise, while my passions run high and strong. I must not speak even to you, kind Françoise; I dare not; for *attendez!* my good, dear Papa, he says to me:

"'Little Jeanne,' he says, that *cher bon père;* 'little one of mine, whisper not a word to anyone of what troubles thee while thy blood is hot. If thou dost, thou dost get thyself and perhaps others into sore and bitter trouble. I have lived through troublous times and I *know.*'

"So, kind Françoise, before I came here to this great school where I have been, oh! *so* miserable, I took a vow—standing by the knees of *le bon père*—that I would keep silence always until my anger had cooled down. Ah! *oui,* but it was a vow, and I must keep it. I will not have a broken vow upon my soul. To-morrow I will perhaps speak, but not now, for it is a vow. You understand?"

"I comprehend," replied Françoise Dupuis.

She was silent for a full minute, then she said calmly:

"I would be your true friend; I would also do the right. Where did you say, little sad one, that M. *le bon père* lives?"

"I did not say anything," replied Jean. "What I had to tell you did not relate to my father."

"Nevertheless," continued François, "I presume that your good father *has* an abiding place. Why not whisper it to me now, little one of the sad heart?"

Jeanne looked steadily into the crafty eyes of Françoise Dupuis.

Her words were undoubtedly kind, and after the bitter way in which Caterina de Mori and Muriel St. John had spoken to her, they fell like balm on

her wounded heart. Notwithstanding these pleasant words, however, Jeanne felt a strange and ever growing sense of distrust rising up within her with regard to her new friend. She already regretted what she had said to the girls of the Committee.

She hated most of these girls, but she had a real affection for Edmée Leroux. She knew that if Françoise was true to her word, Edmée would get into very serious trouble, and that she, Jeanne herself, could not possibly escape. She felt almost inclined to bite out her own tongue at the thought of the words she had spoken about Françoise to the Committee. In short, she knew herself to be surrounded by danger, and quickly made up her mind not to mention another word on the subject of her trouble to Françoise; she also resolved to see Edmée privately and to put her on her guard.

Having settled in her own mind how to act, she felt a degree happier. She assured Françoise that she would speak to her to-morrow, but that to-night she could not even mention the residence of *le bon père;* and trusting that she had got the best of it with her strange new friend, she went into the house.

But the arrangement made by Jeanne Gérusez lacked one element of success. Jeanne was very weak and unstable in character, and Françoise was equally strong. Françoise could read Jeanne through and through like a book.

She appeared to agree now with her new friend's

plans while in reality she had firmly made up her own.

Hitherto Françoise had been a nobody in the school. Now the chance was unexpectedly put into her hands of being not only somebody, but a very great somebody. She would tell; she would break up a conspiracy; she would be hailed by every teacher in the school as a deliverer. The best and nicest of the girls would follow in the wake of the adoring teachers—yes, her place was assured to her.

But in order to bring her firm resolve to its rightful conclusion she must secure the help of the girl who had first put her on the scent. Jeanne Gérusez must confirm her tale, and Françoise already perceived that, angry as she undoubtedly was when she left the summerhouse, she was already beginning to repent. Force must therefore be used on Jeanne, and who so likely to use that necessary force as *le bon père*. Yes, Françoise must invoke the aid of *le bon père*.

Jeanne would not in her present state of mind give her either his name or address, but Françoise, who was as sharp as a needle, knew where the great book which held the names and addresses of the girls was kept.

Mlle. Suzanne had charge of it; Françoise did not think she would have much difficulty in coming round Mlle. Suzanne.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE VIPER VERSUS COBRA.

Having absolutely made up her mind, Françoise did not take long in taking certain steps to carry out her design.

There was in her opinion no use whatsoever in waiting for to-morrow when to-day still lingered by her side. As this was her invariable rule in life, it was quite possible that Françoise Dupuis might go far—whether in goodness or in the reverse, remained to be proved.

At the present moment she considered herself virtuous, even though she was obliged to attain her heart's desire by crooked paths.

Mlle. Susanne was quite the most popular teacher in the school. She was kind to rich and poor, to French girls and foreigners alike. She never complained, she never grumbled. Above all things, she made a firm rule never under any provocation to carry stories about *les demoiselles* to Madame la Comtesse de Trés, or, indeed, to any of the other teachers. Mlle. Susanne was therefore a prime favourite with the ninety-two girls at La Chapelle.

Françoise now thought of Mlle. Susanne and re-

solved to take her into her confidence. She would do this only as far as her needs required—not one step farther would she go. She felt that her task was an easy one, for Mlle. Susanne was the reverse of curious. As a matter of fact, she did not wish to know anything which did not relate to her own immediate duties in the school. Mlle. Susanne felt that the less she knew, the better for herself and for the *chères jeunes demoiselles* committed more or less to her care.

It wanted an hour to *dîner*—the ground floor of the great house was nearly empty. It is true a few girls still lingered in the great central *salle d'étude,* where lessons were prepared for the morrow, but Miss Tabor had charge of these, and the greater number of the young demoiselles had retired either to the vast *salle* on the first floor, or to wander through the old chapel. Jeanne Gérusez had disappeared there some time ago; and also all those members of the Committee who had so cruelly treated that rich young demoiselle from Lyon.

This was the chance for Mlle. Françoise.

She waited about for it, lingering on purpose in the vast room where lessons were prepared. Then suddenly shutting her books, putting them neatly into her leather bag, and going into the central *salle,* she bided her time. One or two girls passed her on their way upstairs, but she was not a favourite nor in their eyes interesting. It did not matter to them what she did or how she did it—they forgot her as

soon as they passed her. These girls slowly ascended the broad, low stairs without giving Françoise a thought; even the timid Jeanne would have been more interesting to them just then than one like Françoise Dupuis.

On most occasions Françoise would have felt wild at this lack of interest, but just now it suited her purpose to a nicety.

By and by the little teacher she was waiting for appeared. She came out of the great classroom, stopped for a quarter of a minute when she saw Françoise, but concluded that the girl must know her own business best, and therefore vanished into her own special and private sitting room. Mlle. Susanne had a great deal to do, and the minutes allotted to her were therefore most precious.

She was absorbed in the very heart and essence of her work when a tap sounded on one of the panels of her door. Mlle. Susanne sprang at once to her feet and went to open it. Françoise stood without—in spite of every effort to the contrary the face of the French girl looked a little pale; her lips trembled very slightly; and her small, pale blue eyes wore an expression which Madame la Comtesse would have called furtive, but to which Mlle. Susanne gave a kinder name. The interest of Mlle. Susanne was now thoroughly aroused; she held out her hand and drew the girl into the shelter of her cosy little room.

"Chère Demoiselle, thou art in trouble," said Mlle. Susanne in a tone which was almost affection-

ate—she regretted now that she had not spoken to the girl when she saw her seated alone in the central *salle.*

"Yes, I am in trouble," replied Françoise, taking her clue at once from Mlle. Susanne's own words—"not a big trouble but a very little one. Still, it is a perplexity, and I do own that it worries me. I have to write, oh! immediately a letter—yes, a letter of great importance. *Comprenez-vous* that it is a letter of the most private? And to-night—yes, this very night—it must go; but I have lost the address. It has occurred to me, therefore, *Chère Mademoiselle,* that you can help me, and above all things will not tell about me to the Head Mistress or any other of the staff."

"Certainly I will not reveal your little sorrow, Françoise," said Mlle. Susanne, giving a quick glance at her neglected work; "but I am busy, dear child—my, work, my work, yes. it waits. In what manner can I help you?"

"Oh! but yes, you are good," said Françoise, who had now quite recovered her usual calm. "And I will not keep one so useful and so busy from her work. You, Mlle. Susanne, keep the great book which holds the names and addresses of every girl in the school. Permit me to turn the leaves for a minute or two, and most assuredly I shall find the address that has slipped my memory."

Mlle. Susanne sat for half a minute considering, while Françoise's small and greedy eyes were fixed

with an expression of most intense anxiety full on her face. Had Mlle. Suzanne seen the look in those eyes, and even half read their intense anxiety, she might have hesitated; but as it was she saw nothing, observed nothing; she was thinking of her own heavy work, and the request of Françoise Dupuis seemed innocent enough.

She rose, therefore, from her seat; took the heavy volume from its place in a locked drawer, and put it without uttering a word into the hands of her young pupil. Even then she failed to notice how the hands of Françoise trembled as she stretched them out to receive the coveted volume.

"You will be quick, very quick, *chèrie,*" she remarked, and then she returned to her accustomed and interrupted work.

There was no need to tell Françoise to be quick, very quick. She knew exactly where to look. While the little teacher became at once absorbed in her usual work, Françoise turned to those names which were entered under the letter G. Soon—Ah! very soon, she came across what she longed to obtain—the name and also the address of Jeanne Gérusez. Yes, *le bon père,* that excellent and worthy man, resided in the *Rue de la Place, numéro* 10, *Lyon.* His name was Monsieur Paul Gérusez, and in a paragraph neatly inserted below his name were the words: *silk manufacturer of Lyon.* Ah, yes, Jeanne was right when she said that *le bon père* was rich, yes,

very rich—richer, far richer than Françoise's own father, the well-known *avocat* of Paris.

A flush of satisfaction mounted to Françoise's somewhat sallow face; she closed the book which contained the names and addresses; laid it on the table by Mlle. Suzanne's side, and said:

"I thank you, Mademoiselle; I have discovered what I want. *C'est bon, n'est ce pas?* And you will not repeat, kind Mademoiselle, to any of the other demoiselles, that I have looked in the address book to obtain my knowledge?"

"I never repeat," muttered Mlle. Suzanne, bending low over her work.

Françoise quietly and quickly left the room, but when the door had closed behind her, Mlle. Suzanne raised her head, and a look of thought and even perplexity visited her broad, white brow. Had she done right to show the address book? Had she—the most punctilious of little women—broken a rule? Ah, *mais non,* it could not be so. Nevertheless, in future she resolved to avoid Françoise, for she felt that in some strange way, she, who was known to like everybody, did *not* like this Parisian girl with the crafty face. Yes, that was the word—crafty.

Mlle. Suzanne, who was the soul of openness herself, could not bear anything of that sort. She locked up the address book and tried to forget the circumstance of Françoise's visit, but it would not pass from her mind, and her tranquil nature was, for the time at least, slightly unhappy.

Meanwhile nothing special occurred that evening in the school, but during the night that followed there was one young girl who lay awake. She ought to have slept quite soundly, but sleep was far from her wide-open eyes. The girl whose cubicle was at her right slept, breathing gently and softly; the girl at her left hand also slept; but Jeanne Gérusez lay wide, very wide awake, with her eyes looking into the darkness. What was she to do—what could she do?

There had been a time not so very long ago when she almost hated certain girls in the school. These girls, so gay, so bright, so merry, passed her by without notice or remark. She was as nothing to them, less than nothing. She felt her own inferiority! she hated herself for what she knew she possessed. For the first time in all her existence she understood the true value of money. Money could not do everything. *Le bon père* said it could, but *le bon père* was wrong. Even money such as his could not give that intangible something which these other girls possessed as a birthright. It could not give beauty of face and dignity of carriage; it could not give that aristocratic pride which was so marked in la Comtesse de Mori—even in Juliette de Tournay; even in the two Italian girls, Gemma Ravella and Imelda Olivetta.

Each and all of these young maidens carried themselves like so many fair queens. Jeanne shrank from them and was afraid. Even the thirty English girls,

some of whom were plain enough in feature, and some of whom were awkward enough in carriage, possessed this distinction, subtle, undefinable, and yet most truly their heritage. They were, one and all, ladies by birth. Little Jeanne Gérusez was not a lady by birth, and not all the wealth of all the world could make her one. Why had *le bon père* sent her to such a school; why had he deliberately opened her eyes to regard herself for what she was—a failure? She lay flat on her back thinking, thinking hard. Why was there so marked a difference between herself and Edmée Leroux? Of course Edmée was pretty and *aimable,* but she—the daughter of a vine-grower at Tourelle—was no more a lady than was Jeanne Gérusez, daughter of the silk manufacturer at Lyon. And yet everyone loved Edmée. She was in the thick of the fun of the school. Jeanne wanted to share this fun with her friend—at least with the girl who used to be her friend—but the others, although they admitted Edmée, would have nothing, nothing whatsoever, to do with her.

Notwithstanding all these things, however, notwithstanding her tempest of passion in the summer-house, Jeanne still loved Edmée and would not injure her for the world, and yet had she not injured her?

She sat up in bed in the cold and darkness, and pressed her hands to her burning cheeks and tried to think out the position. Ah, *le bon père;* he was right—he was right. Jeanne had acted with rare fool-

ishness, with contemptible passion. She had even given her secret away to Françoise Dupuis, and the more she saw of Françoise the more utterly and completely did she distrust her. It seemed to Jeanne that she read Françoise's character in her face when she looked at her in the early gloaming of that day. She saw in those small and narrow eyes avarice, greed, undue excitement—a vanity all preponderating; a desire to raise herself at the expense of others, which would stop at nothing.

Françoise knew enough to make mischief, and mischief she would assuredly make.

"I am glad," thought Jeanne, as she lay down again on her little hard bed, "I am glad at least that I did not give the address of *le bon père*. Françoise will get nothing more out of me but—but I must put those haughty girls on their guard. How shall I manage this—in whom can I confide? It seems to me that in this great school no one cares for me; I am lonely, desolate, but at least I will not injure Edmée who was kind to me at first and would be kind to me still if she had the time. Shall I tell Edmée the name of the one I fear? *Mais non, non,* it would be unfair to Edmée. This must be the work of an outsider. In whom can I confide? Someone must be told, and that quickly, before Françoise works her mischief."

Jeanne's quick thoughts travelled rapidly from one girl to another. Each and all she rejected as impossible. Joyce, the newcomer, was, it is true,

most *charmante,* but she was absolutely fresh to the ways of the school and would be puzzled how to act. Would it not be best to impart her fear and her secret to one who as far as she could tell knew nothing whatsoever of the rats, of the stealthy footsteps, of what went on from time to time in the great old front attic?

Suddenly like a ray of sunshine there darted across her vision the memory of Hope Ashley, that young English maiden, who, if not greatly loved by all, was assuredly respected by all, who was very stately and very gracious, and who was known to be closely related to that belle from *Angleterre,* Joyce Selby. Yes, perhaps Hope could help her. Jeanne did not know Hope at all well, but Hope was never unkind to anyone, and whenever the two had happened to meet, she had greeted the little French girl with one of her quick, radiant smiles—a smile so sudden and unexpected that it invariably delighted the heart of the girl on whom it was bestowed.

Hope Ashley held her own in the school, and she held it just by reason of her dignity and patience and that peculiar beauty, which was more the beauty of the soul than of the feature. The clear light that shone out of those large, greeny-brown eyes, the erect and fearless young carriage, singled out Hope as a girl whom no one could possibly despise. She was also extremely clever and was in high favour with all her teachers, whether English, French or German.

Hope had a natural gift for soothing, and Fräu-

lein Schwann was one of the first to discover this. She, poor lady, was at times racked with nervous headache. It was not the custom at the school to notice these so-called slight ailments, but Fräulein, turning from side to side of her hot pillow, felt that her sufferings were not slight—in fact, that her anguish was very keen. There came a day when the poor German Fräulein was in a worse plight than usual. She was forced to retire from her duties, to creep upstairs to her hot cell and lie down, but ah, there was no rest for her in that sunlit room. She twisted and turned and moaned until suddenly a hand, cool and soft, was laid upon her brow and, lifting her burning eyes, she saw Hope standing by her bedside.

"*Mein gutes Fräulein,* thou canst not ease this suffering, believe me, *mein Fräulein,* I am best alone," but Hope's reply was to say in a gentle voice, "I shall be back in a moment."

She was back in the prescribed time. She opened the casement windows wide, and having done so, she placed across them several folds of green nun's veiling, which caused the sunlight to change its burning hues to the softened light of a wood in the middle of summer.

At this time the English girls' dormitory was empty, and Hope managed to make a draught by pushing back a certain portion of the heavy curtain, which acted in place of a door. She then laid handkerchiefs wrung out of *eau-de-cologne* and water on

the Fräulein's brow, and moistened her feverish hands with the same delicious and cooling mixture. Finally, as the poor woman closed her sleepy eyes, Hope, sitting down near her and taking her hand, began to exercise on her behalf all the will-power she possessed—will-power which she firmly believed would aid the Fräulein's recovery. She willed with all her might and soul that Fräulein should get better, that Fräulein should sleep; and it so happened that Fräulein did feel easier, and it further happened that she dozed off into delicious, painless slumber.

Hope sat by her for a time, then she went to her own little room and prepared some delicious English tea to give to the poor woman when she awoke.

Fräulein did awake after some hours' sleep, free of pain and wondering what had happened to her. Hope made her drink the tea and munch a sweet biscuit, and from that instant Fräulein Schwann loved Hope as the apple of her eye. She never spoke about her deep affection, for that was not her fashion; but she adored the sweet, young and stately maiden, placing her in that corner of her heart which was most tender and most true.

It was about this time that Muriel St. John became jealous of a certain popularity which Hope Ashley unquestionably held in the school. It is possible that this jealousy may have been aroused by some innocent words spoken about Hope by the grateful Fräulein, but be the cause what it might,

Muriel St. John set her wits to work, and finding that Hope would have nothing to say to the *Société de Joie,* though she faithfully promised not to speak of it to anyone, Muriel deliberately and calmly began to deprive Hope Ashley of her best friends. There was, of course, the Comtesse Caterina de Mori. There was Mlle. Alain de St. Aignan; there was even Edmée Leroux; there were, in short, most of the nicest girls in the school; but Hope's nature was so lofty, so simple, so grand, that she never for a moment blamed Muriel for her own decreasing popularity, only she did hope that when her own dearest friend and first cousin, Joyce Selby, arrived, Joyce would be allowed to continue their hitherto unbroken friendship without a flaw.

Muriel was in one sense, however, far too clever for Hope. It was she who managed to arrange that Joyce's little bedroom should be placed next her own, and far from the one occupied by Hope. She was also absolutely determined to get Joyce as a member of the *Société de Joie,* and Joyce was bound by her bond not to reveal a single word of what had gone on in the front attic to her friend and companion, Hope Ashley. If Joyce had been left to herself she would have told Hope everything. She would have asked her advice and sought her counsel, but she was bound by that word which she proudly called her bond, and dared not let out anything.

The morning of the second day broke after the great fête in the old attic. Jeanne Gérusez had made

up her mind. She would avoid Françoise if such were possible, and she would boldly seek the confidence of that girl whom everyone respected and loved, Hope Ashley.

She slept a little towards morning and awakened with a comparatively light heart. Beside her little bed was a tiny writing-table with pens and ink. Jeanne jumped out of bed, wrote a few hasty words to Hope, and gave the note to Aimée, one of the numerous maids who waited on the girls. She was to take it immediately and secretly to Miss Hope Ashley and to wait for an answer. If she brought an answer back Jeanne would reward her with a whole franc.

"*Voilà,*" she cried, holding up the tempting morsel.

Aimée ran off in high spirits. She was a French girl and loved a secret with zest.

Hope received her letter without let or hindrance, and hastily wrote a brief reply.

"I will meet you during recess under the great oak tree not far from the lake," were Hope's few words; then, as an afterthought she added a postscript—"I will gladly help you if I can."

Aimée tripped back to the dormitory where Jeanne slept, holding the tiny, three-cornered note in her hand. She was in high spirits and wondered how she would spend her franc. Ah, but cherry-coloured ribbons would be adorable, and they would

please that good fellow, *Jacques,* who loved pretty, dark Aimée with the black eyes.

As she was dashing down the corridor, however, in the direction of Jeanne's little cubicle, she encountered Françoise Dupuis. Françoise had certainly dressed earlier than was her wont. She stood now directly in her path, and, seeing the note, became consumed with curiosity.

"Aimée, where goest thou?" she remarked, speaking in the French tongue. "For whom is that most charming *billet-doux?*"

"Not for you, mademoiselle," said Aimée. "Let me pass, please, for the matter is urgent."

"Thou little, little viper, thou little snake in the grass; dost thou indeed think that *billets-doux* can pass undetected in this school. Give it to me and I will take it to Madame."

"*Non, non, non,*" screamed Aimée; "it is not, indeed, it is not of anything wrong. It is from a mademoiselle to a mademoiselle. Touch me not, Mlle. Françoise; I like you not at all."

Aimée made so loud a noise that Jeanne, who was listening intently, heard her. It was now or never with Jeanne Gérusez; her courage caught fire, her passion boiled. She flew out of her cubicle; rushed up to where Françoise and Aimée were talking; snatched the little note with an air of triumph and vanished.

"Ah, bah, you shall pay for this," said the angry Françoise.

She comforted herself, however, with the reflection that whatever the note contained and whomsoever the note was from, she had herself taken steps. For had she not the night before written to Monsieur Paul Gérusez, requesting him to lose no time in coming to La Chapelle if he would save his child, his only child, from destruction?

The letter was written hurriedly and much blotted, but its meaning was plain enough, and the little page-boy, Henri Sarci, had, with his own hands, taken it from her to add to the pile of letters which went each night from La Chapelle to the post-office at Tourelle.

Now it so happened that the small boy who was thus employed by the Comtesse de Trés was a nephew of that admirable woman, Citoyenne Pelven; and if there was a knowing small boy in the whole of Tourelle it was young Henri Sarci. He was a special favourite with his aunt, Citoyenne Pelven; and as she greatly loved gossip and the news of the school, he invariably called in at her house on his way to the post-office in order that they might together look over the letters which the demoiselles had written.

Henri was rewarded for this act of treachery by stale sweetmeats and chocolates, both of which he thoroughly enjoyed. Citoyenne Pelven was as clever as woman could be, and she now looked eagerly through the batch of correspondence. The only one which specially arrested her attention was that which

was addressed in an untidy, indeed, slovenly hand, to Monsieur Paul Gérusez, Rue de la Place, Lyon.

Why, was not that the name of the father of *la petite vipère?* Madame's small black eyes fixed themselves on Henri's face.

"This letter was given to me," he said, "by a strange demoiselle. She was flushed in the cheeks and red on the tip of the nose—so! And she looked —ah! ugly. They call her in the school Françoise Dupuis. She means mischief by that letter, does she not, little mother?"

"'Little son, thou art right," replied his aunt, "and you and I, we will take the law into our own hands and commit the smudged and worthless letter to the flames. Hurry now, *mon bon garçon,* to the post-office with the other letters, and remember, not one word of this."

"Ah, *non, ma foi!*" cried the French boy with a look of delight.

He gathered up the remaining letters and took his departure.

"Vipères are bad," muttered Citoyenne Pelven to herself, "but cobras—the cobra is even worse! I commit the letter of the hungry cobra to the flames in my little stove."

CHAPTER IX.

HOPE ASHLEY.

It was one of those unspoken rules made by that most excellent mistress, Madame la Comtesse de Trés, that all her young pupils should form their own friendships—should make their own friends without any interference from the Head Mistress herself or from her staff. Thus, according to her belief, the girls could early learn individuality, could early find out for themselves who were good and worthy, and who were the reverse in the school. Thus Madame never allowed what is so common in many schools in her beloved country, *i. e., spying.*

No notice was taken of so-called school friendship, and all that the teachers—French, English and German—could do, or were indeed permitted to do, was to see that the friendships were not in any manner interfered with.

Had this not been the invariable rule, more than one teacher and several of the young demoiselles would have loudly expressed astonishment when they saw Hope Ashley and that singularly unpleasant French girl, Jeanne Gérusez, pacing up and down, up and down before the eyes of the entire school,

during the three-quarters of an hour devoted to recess.

Hope had chosen the place of rendezvous wisely. The shelter of the old oak tree close to the lake, or large pond, was the very corner where a girl might pour out her griefs even in the sight of all the world, without being interrupted or without any chance of being overheard. The place was at once private and open. All the little world of eager schoolgirls could see, but not one could hear what was going on.

Most of the other girls, it is true, had their own secrets to confide to their own friends; their own laments to pour into sympathetic ears; or their own joys to communicate. La Comtesse de Mori passed Hope Ashley and Jean Gérusez with a sneer on her lips; little Mlle. Suzanne gave the pair an anxious glance; but the only person who was seriously perturbed was Françoise Dupuis. Françoise fully expected to be *herself* in Hope's position at this critical moment. Her anger rose high; she guessed at once from whom the letter had been sent to Jeanne Gérusez. Hitherto she had not troubled herself much about Hope, but now she recalled certain things about her—certain small matters which had reached her ears.

Hope was an English girl, and of course it went without saying—rich; but Hope had a curious knack of losing her friends. No one could guess why she lost them, but undoubtedly lose them she did. There

was something about Hope Ashley—perhaps her stately young height, perhaps her quick and wonderfully radiant smile, perhaps her undoubted talent—which made her even in the eyes of the daughter of the Parisian *avocat* a most desirable companion—the sort of girl whom it would be nice to be seen with—and yet beyond doubt, no one *could* tell why, Hope lost her friends.

Even now there were whispers in the school that the new girl—that absolutely radiant personality, Joyce Selby—would soon go over to the enemies' camp.

What was this gallant-looking young Hope Ashley doing, that she stooped—yes, surely that was the word—*stooped*—to one so small and mean as Jeanne Gérusez?

By all that was honourable, Jeanne ought to be now pouring her confidences into Françoise's own ears.

Well, at least the letter to *le bon père* was on its way—Jeanne had done for herself when she refused to give the address of *le bon père* to Françoise Dupuis. She little guessed the resourcefulness of that young person. Yes, thank *le Bon Dieu,* the letter was on its way. Françoise was most certainly no favourite with the school. It was true, however, that on the rare occasions that they met, Hope was, to say the least, polite to her.

The daring idea now darted through the girl's brain that she would interfere with Jeanne and make

the group of two a group of three. Why not? Why should not one who had been already confided in be present to secure further confidences? No sooner did this thought flash through her brain than Françoise resolved to act on it.

When she—Françoise—appeared before the Head Mistress, accompanied as of course she must be, by the shrinking Jeanne, how truly magnificent it would be to have Hope Ashley also to bear her company.

Madame la Comtesse might doubt Jeanne, might even doubt Françoise, but no Head Mistress in her senses could doubt the word of one like Hope Ashley. This would be the beginning of a really delightful friendship between the two—Jeanne might be swept aside; Jeanne was less than nobody; but Hope and Françoise! Ah! well, they would suit each other well—there would be no fear of *this* friendship coming to an end. Françoise inwardly chuckled. She would delay no longer—there was no time like the present.

Accordingly, Françoise, in the broad light of the soft autumn day, crossed the lawn and approached the spot where the two girls were pacing slowly up and down. There were marks of tears on Jeanne's sallow cheeks; Hope looked very calm, very dignified, very sorry.

"Hush for a moment, Jeanne," she said; "a girl wishes to interrupt us. I do not quite know her name."

Jeanne raised her tear-laden eyes.

"Oh! Oh! Hope Ashley," she gasped; "she is *the* girl—the girl who wants to make all the mischief. Oh! she will be so angry; oh! save me—save me, Hope!"

"Hush," said Hope, "leave the matter in my hands. You said her name was Françoise—Françoise what?"

"Françoise Dupuis. Oh! Oh! save me—save me, Hope, dear, dear Hope."

Hope turned her head aside with a strange mingling of disgust and very sincere pity.

Then she stood motionless, holding Jeanne's little, cold, red hand in one of hers.

Françoise tripped up to the pair with what she considered the inimitable grace of the young Parisian.

"I thought I might join in this little matter," she said, darting a venomous glance at Jeanne, but smiling at Hope. "I thought it would be well for me to join. I pity you, Miss Ashley—or rather Hope, as I suppose I may call you—but of course you will agree with me that however disagreeable this thing must appear to honourable girls like yourself and me, nevertheless it is our bounden duty to support poor Jeanne when she makes her confession to *Madame la Comtesse de Trés.*"

"*What confession has she to make?*" asked Hope in a tone of intense haughtiness.

"What confession? Why, surely she has told you."

"We have been talking on matters of deep interest to us both," said Hope. "Your appearance on the scene has disturbed us a good deal. Will you be so very kind as to leave us for the present?"

Françoise's face grew a vivid scarlet; her small, ugly eyes flashed what fire they were capable of.

"Very well," she said, "I go; but remember I go to tell."

"To tell—to tell what?" asked Hope Ashley.

'Ah! but that I will not say. You have received me rudely and I depart as rudely; with as small a sense of compunction; only, one last word: I understand *now,* Hope Ashley, yes, I clearly understand now why you do not keep your friends in this school, and also why you are forced in your despair to have recourse to one so small, so mean, so low as Jeanne Gérusez; to give her a place as your special companion at La Chapelle. Yes, I understand all now—you tried to carry the matter off with a high hand, but *pour moi,* I know the truth, and I will tell—yes, I will tell."

Françoise was now in a towering passion, but Hope still looked calm and serene.

"I have been longer in the school than you have, Mlle. Dupuis," she said, speaking very gravely, very gently. "I should therefore strongly advise you for *your own sake* not to disturb Madame la Comtesse with idle tales which you cannot possibly prove."

As Hope finished these last words, she turned very sweetly towards Jeanne.

"Now, Jeanne," she said, "shall we continue our interrupted conversation?"

Françoise, feeling—she could not quite tell why—slightly stunned, walked very slowly away, and Jeanne wiped the quick falling tears from her eyes.

"How wonderful you are," she said. "You are not even afraid of *her?*"

"I am certainly not afraid of Mlle. Dupuis," said Hope. "But now let us forget her, Jeanne, and will you continue your story?"

"Oh, I've been so miserable," said Jeanne, feeling herself as she uttered the words lulled into peace and security by that gentle and yet commanding young presence, by the kindly light in the honest eyes. "I have had, *vous comprenez, Mademoiselle,* but one friend in this great School. I loved my friend, oh, very dearly. Her name is Edmée Leroux. She is, in fact, no longer my friend. I think she would be kind to me, but she has not the time, *vous comprenez.*"

"Oh, yes, I know all about that," said Hope, smothering a very faint sigh.

"The *mystery* has taken her from me," continued Jeanne Gérusez. "I wanted not *all* her time, but I wanted some. I did not want all her confidence, but I wanted some, and there *is* a mystery. Talk not of it, *chère mademoiselle,* but it exists; and it has taken my Edmée from me. I would not have

minded in the least had it been any other girl in this School; but being Edmée, my—my passions rose. I must tell you the simple truth about myself, *chère* Hope Ashley. Although I look stupid and dull and —and sullen, and of the sort who are called timorous, so much so that other demoiselles say of me that butter would not melt in my mouth — yet, *chere mademoiselle,* I have of the passions—oh, the most intense, the most furious. I can love with an undying devotion, and I can also hate—yes, *hate!* And, mademoiselle, I hate one girl here called Muriel St. John; and I hate another called La Comtesse de Mori; and there are yet others again whom I hate, and my blood boils when I think of them and what they have done to me, and how cruelly they have spoken to me. Mademoisele Hope Ashley, I made up my mind to discover the mystery which had torn from my arms and, oh—oh—from my heart, the love of Edmée Leroux. I had determined to discover what the whispering in corners meant; what the nods and smiles meant; above all things, why Citoyenne Pelven came so often to the School and hid behind the great summerhouse; and why—oh, why certain demoiselles at certain times crept softly in the dead of night from their beds and went like phantoms up and up and up, beyond even the English girls' dormitory. I made up my mind to probe this mystery. So two nights ago, mademoiselle, I wrapped myself in a great black cloak which my mother, who is with God, bless her soul! used to wear. And I stood in

the recess which, in the old days when this house was a convent, held a life-size figure of the Mother Superior carved in marble. Her ashes lie now close to the altar in the old chapel, and the marble figure has been removed; for this is no longer a convent but a School. But, mademoiselle, the recess remains, and I crouched there and waited—waited—waited. For four long hours did I wait, and about the middle of the time I heard the *rats*. Ah, but they came in multitudes and rushed along the floor over my head! And I crouched into myself and prayed to *Le Bon Dieu* to preserve me. Then, after a very long time, there were steps heard descending the broken stairs which led to the old attics; and I saw Muriel St. John and that new maiden, Joyce Selby, descending arm in arm. Muriel held a dark lantern, and some of its light fell on me, although I crouched very far back in the recess. The new mademoiselle called out, 'Who is there?'—the new mademoiselle with a face, a face of an angel. And I felt I could grovel at her feet and almost worship her with love. But Muriel's thin high voice said:

"'It is but a fleeting shadow.' And she took the young demoiselle as far as the door of her dormitory and then she hurried back. I don't know why I did not escape while she was gone, but I suppose I was partly numbed and paralysed. Anyhow, she dragged me out by the shoulder. Ah, *chère mademoiselle,* I was *no* fleeting shadow to her! And then she said to me, she said that I had acted as no honourable

girl should act; and that I was a spy, *mais oui,* a spy! Ah, but she nearly broke my heart! She spoke so bitterly and she used such strong words and she would not listen to a word that I could speak. Finally she arranged that I was to meet her and some other demoiselles in the old summerhouse at a quarter to four yesterday.

"Then she let me go, and I crept back to my bed, feeling bruised and beaten and bad. Ah, *chère mademoiselle,* and I think a little mad also. I must have been mad to act as I did. Edmée was no use to me, and I must have some friend, so I suddenly thought of a girl who had not been long at the School. Her name was Françoise Dupuis, and her father was an *avocat* in Paris. I knew that Françoise had as yet no friends in the School, and although she was a total stranger to me, I thought she might even take up with a poor despised little maid like myself. So I bought cakes and chocolates from Citoyenne Pelven, and this time yesterday in the hour of recess, I waited about in the old-fashioned rose garden which the nuns used to cultivate so splendidly, until Françoise should appear. A sort of instinct seemed to tell me that she would walk down a certain corridor and come out into the rose garden, for I had often seen her there, bending over the flowers and smelling them. She is, *chère mademoiselle,* what we French demoiselles call ugly, being sallow of face, with very pale blue eyes set close together. And, mademoiselle, eyes so placed are always accom-

panied by meanness of soul. But I did not think of these things as I waited for her. She came at last, as I knew she would, and I ran to her and told her that I was in trouble, and that I had chocolates and cakes to give her if she would listen to my sorrowful tale. She said she would listen, and I thought most surely that I was right, although I might have guessed by the expression of her face that she was not thinking at all of my trouble, but of the *gâteaux* and *chocolats.* I took her to a litle arbour which just holds two, and while she devoured the *chocolats* as *fast* as ever she could, I told her part at least of my story. She became keenly excited and said that the only thing to do was for us both to go at once to Madame la Comtesse and tell her the truth. I said that was not possible, not to-day, at least; and finally she agreed to wait for a little. Then, at the time appointed, I went to the summerhouse. There were present Muriel St. John, La Comtesse Caterina de Mori, Juliette de Tournay, Marguerite de Marni, and my own special old friend, Edmée Leroux. Oh, but it broke my heart to look at Edmée! And Edmée gave me a glance so full of—of sorrow, and of —yes, *love.* Then I could bear it no longer, and I tried to speak and to explain. I tried to show that I meant no mischief, only I was lonely, very lonely, and wished to join those girls who were happy and gay and were not afriad of the rats. But all my desires were scoffed at most bitterly, and I was only assured that if I gave up *prying* and *spying,* the girls

themselves would forgive me and let me alone; and I should not share the awful fate of one whom they called Pauline. Again, and yet again I begged to be allowed to join. I said I would be their slave and do their bidding, but, oh, Muriel and also the Comtesse, they were cold as ice is cold, and they were cruel as fire is cruel. And after a time, chère mademoiselle, I forgot my fear and my timid nature, and wild rage entered into my heart, and I stormed at them all and said words which I cannot recollect. I rushed out of the summerhouse then, only the last thing I saw were the patient brown eyes of my dear and only friend, Edmée. A minute later, as I was rushing along blinded by tears, overpowered by passion, I felt a hand laid on my arm—and there was Françoise. She wanted to know all—not for love of me, oh, no, but because of her insatiable curiosity. Then I remembered words of *le bon père* which he had ever impressed upon me. I was to bear it as a lesson through life never, *never* to give myself away until my passions cooled. *Le bon père* was very anxious on that point, and the night before I came to La Chapelle he made me stand by his knee and take a vow on the subject. I mentioned the vow to Françoise, and—oh, but she was furious. I said I could say nothing more to her that day—not at least until this day had dawned—and she was obliged to make the best of things, although I saw by her eyes and the ugly expression on her face that she was bent on mischief.

"It so happened, mademoiselle, that last night, although I was dead weary, I could not sleep. I was afraid of Françoise and I hated myself for having given her any clue; and I firmly made up my mind to tell her nothing more at all—ah! *oui,* mademoiselle, nothing more at all. But I knew that some girl must know, for Edmée and others must be protected against the wicked machinations of Françoise Dupuis. Then I thought of you, and the more I thought of you, the more I felt that perhaps you would help me; and that is all, Mademoiselle Hope, that is all, only that I am very miserable."

Hope did not speak for nearly a minute. Then she laid her hand gently on Jeanne's shoulder.

"Have courage, Jeanne," she said, "and do not fear what is scarcely likely to happen. I think I understand a good deal more of this mystery than you have any idea of; and I will certainly secure you against any further blame. As to Mademoiselle Dupuis, leave her in my hands. But Jeanne Gérusez, you say you have *no* friend in the School. May I take the place of a friend until you secure a better?"

The startled look of amazement in Jeanne's eyes touched Hope to the innermost recesses of her kind heart.

"Ah—ah, but you are noble!" exclaimed little Jeanne, "and I—I am happy at last. It was *Le Bon Dieu* who told me to go to you in my trouble."

"I will see you out of it," said Hope in her lofty young way, "and will announce at *déjeuner* that

you, Jeanne Gérusez, being, notwithstanding your humble opinion of yourself, full of real worthiness, are in future to be considered my chosen French friend in the School."

"Oh, but do you mean it? Can you mean it?" cried Jeanne.

"When you know me better," replied Hope very gently, "you will always understand that I mean what I say. Meanwhile leave Françoise Dupuis in the hands of myself and—and another."

Jeanne longed to ask who that other was, but there was an arresting sort of look on Hope's noble face which instinctively told the young French demoiselle that so far might she go but no further.

CHAPTER X.

THE GREEN WALNUT BAG.

Hope walked for a short time quite alone after Jeanne Gérusez had left her. She was thinking very deeply over the story which Jeanne had imparted to her. Her thoughts were like her character —filled with determination, and also with that rare quality, which, for lack of a better word, is called "common-sense."

The moments apportioned to recess had come to an end. The great bell sounded for déjeuner, and the girls from all parts of the vast building entered the *salle à manger*. Amongst others might be seen the anxious, yet humbly grateful face of little Jeanne Gérusez; the vindictive face of Françoise Dupuis; and the ordinary everyday faces of the rest of the girls. The English girls took their usual position at the upper table in the *salle à manger*. The other girls took theirs at the far larger table, which ran down the entire length of the great room. The language spoken was of course French, and although Hope found herself near Joyce, and did all in her power to help her beloved friend and cousin to join

in the conversation, she found her own thoughts somewhat far away. Joyce had, however, equally with Hope the power of reading faces. She perceived at a glance that something was worrying Hope and that therefore the best and kindest thing she could now do was to leave her dear cousin in peace. The rest of the English girls chattered volubly, and as to the many French demoiselles, their eager tongues made a humming noise somewhat like the sound of busy bees.

At last the meal came to an end, but just before this happened Hope rose to her feet, turned her calm, compelling eyes in the direction of Madame la Comtesse de Trés, who, on this occasion, was at the head of the English table, and begged in pretty, fluent French to be allowed to say something before the school dispersed.

Instantly all eyes—French, English, German and Italian—were fixed on her face. Madame la Comtesse looked full at the stately, dignified girl, and said in her clear, modulated tones, which, though low in speech, yet carried far:

"*Certainement, mon enfant.*"

Hope bowed in acknowledgment of this permission and then began to speak. Her words were of course uttered in French and with a certain slow deliberation, which caused every girl present and every teacher to understand them.

"I have been for some time at this school," she began, "and I love it well. I love several of the

demoiselles who live under this roof. I love almost all of the staff. As to Fräulein Schwann, she is my very dear friend."

"*Hoch, hoch!*" cried Fräulein, unable to resist the enthusiasm which at these words filled her breast.

"*Pardon, Fräulein,*" cried the Comtesse, "I must request your silence at the present moment."

Hope gave Fräulein one of her swift, sudden smiles. She then continued: "There are some whom I love, some whom I admire, some few again whom I both admire and love. Madame la Comtesse de Trés has indeed during all these years been a support and a help to me, and I take this present opportunity of assuring her of my fealty. But I must now speak plainly. I have also suffered in this school. I have made no word of complaint, but nevertheless I *have* suffered. Those whom I loved and whom I had every reason to believe loved me gradually yet surely devoted themselves to other friends and other pursuits. This may be natural; this may be the lot of all schoolgirls. Nevertheless I feel it as acutely as though I were the only one who had undergone such an experience. Of course I name no names, and I am certain that Madame does not expect me to."

She paused, lowering her eyes with their beautiful veil of thick lashes for a moment, then she raised them again, simply and yet proudly.

"I have one very dear and very close English friend," she continued, "who is also my first cousin

—my almost sister. I allude of course to Joyce Selby. It would pain me very intensely were Joyce to take her love from me and to bestow it on others, but, knowing Joyce as I know her, I do not think that likely. I will therefore pass on quickly to another point. It is as you know, *chère Madame,* the custom in this school for each girl to have—I mean each English girl—one English and one French, German or Italian friend. Now to-day I have made a discovery. There is in the school, Madame la Comtesse, a French girl with a warm heart, who is without a friend. I wish openly to declare that in future, if she will have it so, she is my friend—mine to help if I can, mine to love if she will let me, mine to be my companion, mine to be perhaps my solace. I allude to Mlle. Jeanne Gérusez. Madame la Comtesse, will you permit me to ask you to allow Jeanne Gérusez to come forward, so that I may proclaim her as my friend before you, Madame, and the staff of teachers, and all the assembled school?"

There was a profound silence at the English table. There came a look of astonishment over Madame la Comtesse's face, although she silently bent her proud head in acquiescence. Then there came a sound of confusion at the bottom of the *salle à manger,* and an awkwardly made girl—a girl truly of the people—half scrambled, half ran up the long room, caught hold of Hope's outstretched hand, and stood by her side with a face white as death.

Immediately afterwards the school dispersed and,

after the usual time for recreation, reassembled in their classrooms for afternoon lessons.

Madame la Comtesse could scarcely contain her amazement at Hope's choice of a friend, but she was the sort of woman who never gave herself away, and whom no one dared to question. At a quarter to four to the minute, Hope Ashley appeared in the *salle,* which was mostly devoted to English girls. There were present on this occasion Comtesse Caterina de Mori, Juliette de Tournay, Muriel St. John and Marguerite de Marni. Also seated in one corner, pretending to be absorbed with a book, was Edmée Leroux. The very moment Hope appeared, Edmée sprang from her seat, ran to meet her, took her hand, kissed it with a sort of silent passion, said in a low voice in the French tongue:

"I thank thee, I thank thee," and then vanished from the *salle.*

Hope looked round her at the remaining girls. They, on their parts, returned her gaze with a certain pride, haughtiness and displeasure which they endeavoured in vain to restrain. Hope looked every atom their equal. Indeed her expression at that moment was beyond and above them all, for they were of the earth—earthly, and she was in very truth of the heaven—heavenly. She smiled the sweetest and gentlest smile as her wonderful speaking eyes rested for a moment on Muriel St. John and then passed on to Caterina de Mori. There was not a trace of anger or jealousy in her gaze. She thought it likely these

two might sneer at her, but she did not mind. Her nature was far above being troubled by that sort of thing just now.

"Girls," she said, "I just wish to say a few words to you all. I notice that all present belong to——" she paused a moment and then said very gently, very calmly, "that Society which for reasons of conscience I personally did not think well to join. But Muriel and Caterina and Juliette and Alain—*my* conscience is not *your* conscience, and I have but to answer for myself in the great unknown future. I've come, however, to-day to tell you that what I learned with regard to your *Société de Joie* has naturally and as a matter of course never passed my lips, and what your intentions are with regard to my friend Joyce I neither know nor wish to inquire. Joyce has strength and bravery and courage, and whatever she does she will do because she thinks it right, but now I wish to say to you that your *Société de Joie* is in danger, and not in danger from the source which you suspect. There is no danger from that source, none whatever, but there is a girl in this school who would betray you if she could, who would make mischief if she could. She has said no word to me—in fact, I barely know her; but I do know what I am talking about, and 'forewarned is forearmed.'"

"Do you—can you possibly allude to a new girl who has lately come to the school, and who was observed yesterday talking with great earnestness to your friend—*your friend,* Jeanne Gérusez?" ex-

claimed Muriel St. John. "Can that possibly be the girl? If so, I know her name. She is called Françoise Dupuis, and is the daughter of an *avocat* in Paris. Can that be the girl you mean?"

For answer Hope very slightly bowed her stately young head. "I leave you to deal with her, mademoiselle," she said. "You will doubtless best understand her nature, but please remember that, unlike Jeanne Gérusez, she is not timid—she is not in any sense weak. It is a case of strength against strength, mesdemoiselles. I only thought it right to warn you," whereupon Hope turned and also left the room.

The girls she left behind, who had one by one risen during her brief and exciting speech, now sank back into different easy chairs; but the expression on their various faces was the very reverse of easy. Muriel pushed her thick hair from her brow; the Comtesse de Mori patted her small French foot with extreme restlessness up and down on the floor; Alain de St. Aignan gave a sort of snort which anything but improved her appearance; whilst as to Juliette de Tournay, her black eyes flashed and her small piquant features showed that for the time at least she was governed by passion.

"Arrêtez-vous, mesdemoiselles," exclaimed Muriel suddenly. "There is danger here."

"You mean," exclaimed Juliette, "that—that the snake in the grass, Françoise Dupuis, will really *tell* what she knows? You think she will really go

to Madame la Comtesse and reveal our little innocent secret? Oh, if she does, if she does!"

"Arrêtez-vous, Juliette," exclaimed Muriel again; "pray allow me to speak; pray understand that the Comtesse de Mori and I are at the head of this Committee."

Juliette sank back into her seat, but the frown did not leave her brows, nor did her eyes cease to flash fire.

"What I fear," said Muriel, "is not what that insignificant Mademoiselle Dupuis does or does not do in the School. My real fear is wider and deeper; I can, I think, say something to Françoise which will effectually seal her lips, and if she is strong and clever, as Hope Ashley declares, she may be even of use to us. For remember, mesdemoiselles, that hitherto—I mean up to the present moment—our Society has been marked by amiability, gentleness, kindness. There has not been one member amongst us who has not been more or less influenced by lofty notions. Now suppose we effectually seal the lips of Françoise Dupuis."

"How, how? What do you mean?" exclaimed Alain.

Muriel gave a slight, disdainful smile.

"By asking her to join us," she said. "By asking her, in short, to be a spy, not against us, but *for* us. Think you not that is a valuable thought, mesdemoiselles? Think you not it is worthy even of the brain of Muriel St. John?"

"We cannot possibly entertain the idea in a hurry," said the Comtesse, fingering the gold châtelaine which hung at her waist as she spoke, and which contained thimble, scissors, needles and all those different articles of immediate use which are so beloved by French demoiselles.

"We will postpone saying anything to her till to-morrow," said Muriel; "but meanwhile I myself will sound her. I will be extremely careful to let out nothing, but I will get this daughter of the Parisian *avocat* clearly to understand that if she goes alone and unsupported with her story to Madame la Comtesse de Trés, Madame will naturally ask for witnesses, for at least someone else to confirm her extraordinary tale. She will have no one, for Jeanne has indeed gone over to the enemy; and without Jeanne she is in a sore plight, and the wisest thing she can do is to keep her knowledge to herself. This, if she is strong and courageous, as Hope Ashley declares she is, she will of course quickly understand. In that case we have nothing whatsoever to fear from Mademoiselle Françoise Dupuis."

"Then what *have* we to fear?" cried Juliette. "Why do you frighten us with your words, Muriel? and then come down—come down to nothing at all."

"But I have not come down to nothing at all," cried Muriel. "I only wish to dispose of Françoise—Françoise so insignificant, so unimportant, so devoid of looks and of—of *grâce!* I have only further thrown out the suggestion that such a girl in our

midst, bound to us by irrevocable vows, may be far more useful than we can at present understand. But, mesdemoiselles, let that affair slide for the present. Let it for the time being pass into oblivion. It requires thought, much thought. It may not be advisable. On the other hand it may be far and away the best thing to do. But now to come to the real business of our little meeting. You know *chères demoiselles,* of the famous *Société de Joie* that at the present moment we are short of funds. We have a great programme to carry through; brilliant is no word for it. We want to make an impression on the members of the *Société* which has never yet been made, and we are—we are at this moment—ah, that I should have to say the word!—penniless."

As Muriel spoke she took a little velvet bag which she sometimes wore at her side. It was a little green velvet bag, very pretty, and much embroidered; it had the initials S. de J. embroidered on it also, in rich gold thread. This little bag was, in short, the bank of the Society, and it was empty.

"We have all paid in our subscriptions," said Muriel, "forty francs from each girl. That sounds a good deal of money, *mes bonnes demoiselles.* But it does not suffice; it is not all in all sufficient. Who is to pay for the meeting by which we enthrone our gracious Queen, Joyce Selby? Who is to pay for the *gâteaux,* the *chocolats,* the *sirops,* the hundred and one necessary things which belong to so great—so very great an event? Behold, the little bag is empty!

I gave the very last of its contents this morning to you, Juliette de Tournay, wherewith to settle with Citoyenne Pelven. There is nothing left—nothing at all. If we can secure Joyce, who is very rich, as our Queen, behold, the little bank will be full once more. If we can secure Françoise Dupuis as a member, she doubtless will pay largely for the privilege. I am told that the *avocat* in Paris is wealthy of the wealthy. I ask therefore that some of his funds should be turned in our direction, so that the little bag may be filled once again. Meanwhile I must levy a toll on each member of the Committee here assembled; for there is much to do in the preparing for the reception of our new Queen, and she must not on any account feel the sting of our poverty until she is one of us and cannot withdraw. *Mes enfants,* how much will you each subscribe towards the filling of the little green velvet bag?"

There was a hurried mutter of words passing from one girl to the other, then Alain de St. Aignan rose slowly and laid a napoléon on the table. Juliette de Tournay followed her example, and the Italian girls, Gemma Ravella and Imelda Olivetta each did likewise; but neither the Comtesse de Mori nor Muriel St. John subscribed anything.

"This is far better than nothing," said Muriel, gathering up the coins eagerly and slipping them into the bag.

"But your share, Muriel?" cried Juliette.

"And yours, Comtesse," exclaimed Alain.

"We will also add to the fund, and more largely," cried Muriel without a moment's hesitation. "But now, mesdemoiselles, do you not want to hear, to really hear what my great, my very great fear is?"

The girls who had been looking a little discontented both at Muriel and Caterina, for not doubling the supply of money which they themselves could ill spare, now forgot the subject of money in their intense interest.

"Ah, *oui,* tell us, tell us," cried Juliette.

A very slight smile crossed the lips of Muriel St. John.

"You know of course," she said, "that Hope Ashley is aware of our secrets; that we gave her a hearty welcome into our midst, and implored of her to join our *Société de Joie.* Mesdemoiselles, she refused; she refused absolutely, completely, thoroughly. Naturally we were angry, naturally we were hurt. She said something about her conscience. Ah, bah! Is her conscience more precious than ours? But let that be—Hope would have none of us; therefore we gave her up. She was dear to me, she was dear to the Comtesse Caterina, she was dear to many in this School; but—but—we gave her up because she would not belong. Hope faithfully promised never under any circumstances whatever to reveal our secret. It was not for her, she said, but it would not pass her lips. We believed her. Mesdemoiselles, we believed Hope Ashley."

"And we believe her still," said Juliette de Tour-

nay. "Who would not believe one so noble and so great? It is but to look into her eyes to know, to be sure. Ah, fie, for shame, Muriel St. John! to try to slander your friend."

"I think Juliette is right," said Alain.

"And I think she is right," said Gemma.

"And I *know* she is right," said Imelda. "It would be impossible for Hope to tell a lie; it would not fit her character," continued Imelda, "it would not get out."

"And who has accused her, pray, of telling lies?" enquired Muriel, who saw that she had gone just a step too far. "Still, I must make the remark. Hope does *not* belong to us, but *attendez, mesdemoiselles.* This Hope whom you think so highly of, is closely, very closely connected with our future Queen, with our—with our desire for the great programme which we can only carry out if Joyce Selby becomes one of us. Now, mesdemoiselles, the fear which oppresses my breast is this: Hope, without letting out a single word, may *influence* Joyce against us. Joyce, in short, may refuse to join. This is only a fear—it may never be justified; but there is one thing to be said, one thing to be said at once. If Joyce Selby does not join *La Société de Joie,* that noble *Société* is lost. There! I have spoken. Mesdemoiselles, we must hold our heads high; we must appear to fear nothing while we fear all. Hope has a strange and very marvellous power about her. Did you not hear even old Fräulein cry out in ecstasy when Hope

after déjeuner to-day spoke what she thought! Do not on any consideration whatsoever misconstrue my words. I respect Hope; there was a time when I loved her."

"I love her still," said Juliette.

"And I," said Alain.

"And I—oh, and I," suddenly burst from the lips of Caterina.

Muriel looked at her own special friend with silent astonishment and dismay.

"Yes, it is true," said Caterina. "I gave her up to be on your side, Muriel, but you are not noble, and she is."

"Noble? What do you mean?" cried Muriel.

"I mean," said Caterina, "noble in *soul.* That is the only true nobility."

Muriel could not help a sneer coming across her lips.

"Then you think it was noble of one like Hope Ashley, closely related to Joyce Selby, to take up the daughter of a common silk-manufacturer at Lyon —to make her publicly her friend in the face of all the School? In short, to put one so intolerable, so common, as Jeanne Gérusez, out of her place— Jeanne Gérusez, who is nothing but a spy, a spy. Ah, *pour moi,* I esteem not that sort of nobility."

"Do you not?" said Juliette. "Well, I do; I esteem it extremely."

"And so do I," said Alain.

"And so do I," said Caterina. "The deed re-

quired courage which only Hope possesses. Hope cannot really care for Jeanne Gérusez; she makes her her friend in order to comfort her."

"She will be a dangerous friend," remarked Muriel. "For consider, mesdemoiselles, this friend is a *spy*."

With these words Muriel took up the little green velvet bag, thrust it carefully out of sight in one of her pockets, and left the *salle*.

CHAPTER XI.

FROM PARIS, NOT FROM LYON.

If ever there was a girl who was simply wild with anger, that girl was Françoise Dupuis. Her only hope and comfort lay in the fact that the letter to Paul Gérusez was posted; must in all probability have reached him by now; and that he, this sturdy manufacturer who yet had so sound a sense of right and judgment, would appear on the scene either to-morrow or the next day. Then Françoise's turn would come. She would explain the whole story to Monsieur Paul Gérusez. Jeanne, notwithstanding her grand new friend, could not help flinging herself into the arms of her beloved father; could not help corroborating Françoise's words; and, accompanied by Monsieur Paul Gérusez and Françoise herself, could not fail to get admission to Madame la Comtesse de Trés. Thus the secret, whatever the secret was, would be wrecked, demolished, smashed to powder. Françoise would be rewarded as she deserved, and something which was undoubtedly evil and spiteful would be got rid of, by her means, out of the thriving School.

The thought of this possibility, nay more, of what

she considered this certainty, kept Françoise more or less in a state of composure, notwithstanding her anger, during the hours which immediately followed Hope Ashley's declaration of her friendship for little Jeanne. As to Françoise, she scorned and despised Jeanne unspeakably. Great, indeed, would be her sense of rejoicing in the thought of punishing one so mean, so unworthy. The punishment she considered to be close at hand; she little guessed—how could she?—that Citoyenne Pelven had prevented this by burning the badly-written letter.

"Ah, oui," thought the Citoyenne, "the vipère is bad, but the cobra is worse." The young page-boy, Henri, could, if he wished, tell Françoise what would put her into a state of fury so blinding and overpowering that she would scarcely be able to contain herself; but then Henri had no intention of enlightening the mademoiselle from Paris. He did not like that ugly mademoiselle with the small eyes too closely placed together; with the cheeks which were apt to flush unbecomingly; with the nose which at the least excitement grew red at the tip. Henri Sarci, the young page boy, rejoiced in private over what had happened to Mademoiselle's letter. But repeat it—not he! To repeat it would be to ruin his own chance of good *chocolats,* good *gâteaux,* and the friendship of his esteemed aunt, Citoyenne Pelven. But although Henri did not mean to let out one single word, he rejoiced deeply in the fact that he *knew.* He even played with this little fact, and

when he saw Françoise standing in the great central hall with her hands crossed before her, and her face full of marked discontent, he approached close with his duster and began to polish up the legs of the tables and chairs that stood round. Françoise suddenly fixed her eyes on his face; Henri's eyes were like beads of jet; they suddenly returned the glance of the French girl.

"How long does it take for a letter to get from here to Lyon?" she demanded.

"Ah, *mais oui,*" cried Henri, "I will ascertain, mademoiselle. You have doubtless friends at Lyon, Mademoiselle?"

Françoise turned aside. She was too proud to respond to such a remark from a servant. Henri went to the far end of the hall, examined a certain time-table that stood there, and came back in a minute with the desired information.

"Mademoiselle," he said, speaking humbly and in quite the manner of the well-trained servant, "a letter posted over-night and addressed to the great town of Lyon would get there not later than the afternoon —say *à cinq heures* of the next day, mademoiselle."

"Thank you," replied Françoise. "I gave you a letter to Lyon and you posted it."

"With these," replied the French boy, holding up his two hands, and speaking with undue emphasis.

"*C'est bien,*" answered Françoise. She put a couple of sous into his hand and turned away. Beyond doubt she would hear the following morning,

and Monsieur Gérusez would appear on the scene some time during that day. Yes, Jeanne Gérusez, little wretch, her time of enjoyment with her new friend would not be long.

Meanwhile a girl strolled slowly, or with apparent idleness, into the hall. Françoise could not think of her father, the *avocat,* and her own undoubted and comfortable *dot* in the presence of this girl. She wondered why she lingered in the hall. She wondered still more when she saw her take a deep wicker chair and seat herself therein, just as though she was anxious to remain—just, in short, as though she *intended* to remain. Perhaps she was waiting for someone. Well, the hall was public property. Françoise did not mean to depart. She would hold her ground and watch what transpired. Something would certainly occur, and meanwhile she could watch the girl. The girl had a book with her and was reading, or rather pretending to read. She had very neat feet, beautifully shod. Her stockings were black silk, and open work. She crossed one leg over the other, and Françoise could see each pretty foot distinctly from her own point of vantage. The girl was wearing those essentially quiet English clothes which French girls never aspire to. She had a neat little silk blouse of pale, very pale lavender. Her skirt was of lavender cloth, the same shade as her blouse. The girl was evidently beyond any doubt waiting. Whom was she waiting for? Françoise dared to examine her more minutely. There was a

narrow gold chain round her neck, to which a little locket was attached. From examining the chain it did not take Françoise long to raise her eyes and scrutinise the firmly and beautifully poised neck; the neat features; the mass of golden hair, which rested somewhat low on the brow and was plaited in English, not French, fashion, in one great, thick plait which reached below the girl's waist. This plait was tied at the end with a bow of mauve ribbon exactly in keeping with the girl's blouse and skirt. She wore tiny earrings, so minute as to be almost invisible in her small ears. Her features were straight, her eyes blue, her eyebrows very fair—too fair for mere beauty. And Françoise, who was a sallow French girl herself, admired all these signs of old England in the face and appearance of the well got up English girl.

Suddenly Muriel St. John dropped the book which she had been only pretending to read, turned her calm blue eyes in the direction of Françoise, and said in her dignified and haughty voice:

"Is it possible, mademoiselle, that you desire to say something to me?"

"Ah, *non, non,*" exclaimed Françoise, all her self-possession leaving her at the indescribable haughtiness of Muriel St. John's voice.

"Then why do you stare?" said Muriel. "It is not considered correct, to stare. But perhaps, forgive me if I am wrong, perhaps it is I who have something to say to you. Do I not see before me a

mademoiselle from Paris who is known as Françoise?'"

"That is my name. Oh, oh, have you heard of me?" cried Françoise.

"I have heard of you," said Muriel, "and I—to be honest, I wish to speak to you."

This was news indeed. This caused the heart of Françoise to flutter with delight.

"I shall be proud——" she began.

But Muriel interrupted her words by a wave of her graceful and beautifully made hand.

"We shall be undisturbed here," she said, "and what I have to say will not take very long. I just know you by sight, Mademoiselle Françoise Dupuis. In a great School like this it is impossible to get acquainted with the newcomers immediately. You are, I presume, a newcomer?"

"Ah, *oui, c'est vrai,*" replied Françoise.

"I guessed as much. You have been here but a very short time. Permit me to—to tell you a little bit of your story. You have got already entangled in an affair which may be exceedingly unpleasant for yourself."

The moment Muriel threw down this gauntlet, Françoise lost her nervousness. She said in a tone quite as determined and full of strength as Muriel's own:

"I do not comprehend your meaning."

"Ah," said Muriel, "but you will soon. You became the friend and confidante of a young maiden

of the people who has been longer in the School than yourself. I allude to one Jeanne Gérusez, who is the daughter, I am given to understand, of a silk-manufacturer at Lyon. I do not know anything of your antecedents, mademoiselle, and—forgive me—I care less. But I've come here to speak to you on behalf of myself and some other girls in the School, in order to assure you that you will do no good to yourself or to anyone else by this step which you propose to take."

"What step? What do you mean?" asked Françoise, who now felt thoroughly frightened and ill at ease.

"You think," said Muriel, speaking very quietly and very steadily, "that you have got hold of the first threads of a secret which was imparted to you in a moment of excitement by the young maiden from Lyon, Jeanne Gérusez. As a matter of fact Jeanne knows little or nothing of what she is talking of. She's lonely, however, and unhappy, and as such is the case, she has the extreme felicity of securing the friendship of one of the noblest and most highly-born girls in the School—I allude to Hope Ashley, who is also *my* friend. Now, Françoise Dupuis, Jeanne most bitterly regrets that she ever took you into her confidence. She is quite certain—absolutely certain—that you are bent on mischief. Yes, mischief, Françoise Dupuis. In short, that you have made up your mind to communicate your little scrap of *no knowledge at all* to Madame la Comtesse de

Trés. Is it not so, Françoise Dupuis? Is such not the case?"

"I don't know why I should tell," remarked Françoise, her eyes flashing angrily, and her sallow face flushing in an unbecoming manner.

"I thought," continued Muriel, still speaking with that wonderful dignity, "that you might perhaps have such an intention, and my friends and I thought it best that I should mention to you that such a step on your part would lead to no good whatsoever. I have been at La Chapelle for four years; you have been at La Chapelle for a few weeks; I know Madame la Comtesse; you do not know her. Do you suppose for a single moment she will listen to any story which you bring to her without proof—without proof positive. Jeanne Gérusez will certainly not confirm her words, and whom else have you to fall back upon? You will be only considered in the School a spiteful tale-bearer. Madame will put you in your place, and the putting you there will not be pleasant. I thought I would warn you—entirely for your own sake, remember. If you wish to speak to me again on this subject, I shall be in the rose garden at a quarter-past eleven to-morrow. I should advise you to be careful—new girls cannot interfere with the ways of a great School like this, a School great and old and highly respected. Adieu until to-morrow, Mademoiselle Françoise Dupuis. By the way, you have not yet told me from what sort of family you spring. We think a great deal of *la*

famille in our School. Is your father by chance a—a nobleman?"

"He is an *avocat* of Paris, and rich," said Françoise, bringing out her words with an angry sputter.

Muriel slightly, very slightly raised her shoulders; slightly, very slightly lifted her faintly-marked brows; and then left the central hall, having effectually impressed upon Françoise Dupuis that the daughter of a mere *avocat* was beneath contempt.

Françoise sat for some time after Muriel had left her, oppressed by anxious thought. She was very much struck by Muriel's manner, by Muriel's air—so grand, so stately. But there was something about Muriel which also made the young Parisian girl slightly afraid. Françoise did not understand her own fear—it was a new sensation to her, for Jeanne was quite right when she described her as at once fearless and brave. But was she fearless now? Was she brave at the present juncture? She could not tell; she scarcely dared to think. Muriel had beyond doubt put the case clearly before her. She, Françoise Dupuis, was a newcomer at the School. She also, according to the greater number of the girls at the said School, was a mere nobody. Who was she, for instance, compared to Hope Ashley, to Muriel St. John, to the Comtesse de Mori—to, in short, most of the girls of the School? Of course, on the other hand there were certain *demoiselles* in the great School whom Françoise in her anger considered beneath her. There was, for instance, Edmée Leroux, just the

pleasant-faced, bright daughter of one of the biggest vine-growers at Tourelle; and there was that contemptible little Jeanne Gérusez. Yes, she was contemptible. But Françoise could not help owning to herself that Jeanne, by some power—was it *magic?*—by some power which she herself did not possess, had secured a friend whom she, Françoise, the daughter of the Parisian *avocat,* would have, metaphorically speaking, given her eyes to hold and claim. Hope Ashley was now Jeanne's friend. Hope had made a public declaration to that effect, and Jeanne was thus forever removed out of the influence of Françoise Dupuis. How withering Muriel had been! How scorching and to the point had been her words! How clearly she had pointed out Françoise's own position—Françoise, with her little tag of a secret, to assail Madame la Comtesse; to dare to upset the old traditions of the old School. Yes, Françoise knew that Muriel, in her stately, calm, quiet way, was right. Françoise, without help, could do nothing. But stay—stay—there was still a glimmering of hope. M. Paul Gérusez would surely reply to her by to-morrow morning's post. He would acquaint her with the fact that he was coming—coming as quickly as the slow trains of mid-France could bring him; and when he appeared, even Jeanne, naughty, faithless Jeanne, would be forced to reveal her secret. Yes, the thought of the arrival of M. Paul Gérusez supported Françoise during the remainder of that evening. Her letter was undoubtedly

posted, for had not the French boy, Henri, admitted as much? In all probability she would get her answer to-morrow morning. She tried to picture what M. Paul Gérusez was like. From Jeanne's account he must be a good man; from Jeanne's account he must undoubtedly be a firm man—a man with no nonsense about him; and Jeanne was his only child, just as Françoise was her father's only child. Not that the Parisian *avocat* ever spoke good words to Françoise, or made her take a vow to keep her passions in check—he was always busy, this great *avocat;* always absent from home. Françoise felt even slightly afraid of him, with his stern, long face; his yellow beard; his eyes so closely set, and so like her own. He had told her on one occasion that he was working hard in order to give her a suitable *dot* some day; but he never spoke to her with affection, and never cared for her society. It was impossible for Françoise to feel towards him as little Jeanne felt towards M. Gérusez; and yet he was higher up in the world than M. Gérusez. There were a great many people who thought well of the Parisian *avocat,* and spoke with admiration of his future. Françoise certainly did not love her father, but until this afternoon she had felt a certain pride in him. Now Muriel had taken this pride, crushed it under foot, and left the *salle.* Françoise felt mortified through and through.

But—but—she was courageous; she was brave. She would fight the English girl yet on her own

ground. She had but to wait the arrival of the letter of M. Paul Gérusez.

Disregarding the custom in most French schools, Madame la Comtesse de Trés seldom or never interfered with the correspondence of her young pupils. With regard to this principle she acted in accordance with the schools of England. She allowed the girls to make their own friendships, and she permitted *les demoiselles* to write their own letters without looking at them or interfering with them. She was also equally consistent with regard to the letters which arrived at the School. She felt that a letter was a sacred thing, and that it only did the character of the young mademoiselle harm, not good, if it was tampered with. Accordingly freedom was the rule, and was carefully obeyed by all the teachers. Morning after morning, when the girls assembled in the *salle à manger* for hot, delicious coffee and fresh rolls, Mlle. Suzanne placed the letter bag beside the plate of Madame la Comtesse. Madame unlocked it and distributed its contents. She did this quickly and silently, making no comment the while. As she sorted the letters, she called the name of each girl in turn to receive her share. Françoise, who was seated at the far end of the French table, listened with tingling ears and flushed cheeks. Would there, or would there not, be a letter for her from Lyon? It seemed, as she waited in her burning impatience, as though her turn would never come. That tiresome Mees Muriel St. John; that provok-

ing Mees Hope Ashley; that demoiselle of such rare beauty, Mees Joyce Selby—had quite a little pile of letters each. They came forward to receive their precious store, and resumed their seats at table without uttering a word. Letters were not allowed to be read at the breakfast table, but there was always ten minutes after prayers, when the girls of the School were allowed to glance through their correspondence. There was no letter for Jeanne Gérusez, but there were several for Juliette de Tournay; two or three also for the Italian girls; and a great many for the mistresses who belonged to the Staff. All were dealt out calmly, steadily, without fuss or confusion. Each girl and each teacher received her allotted share. It was also one of the rules of the School that the post only arrived once a day. Madame la Comtesse de Trés had made an arrangement with the postal authorities to send up all the letters to La Chapelle by the morning delivery, and by that alone. "It did not do," argued la Comtesse, "to have the minds of *les demoiselles* disturbed by letters at all hours of the day." Letters were also only allowed to go out at night, and Henri invariably took them *as was supposed* straight to the post-office, but in reality for the quick and eager inspection of his aunt, Citoyenne Pelven. Nothing would induce Citoyenne to open a letter, but she liked to see the addresses, gazing at them with black eyes full of curiosity, through her large horn spectacles, which made her jet black eyes look larger and blacker than ever. Oh, oh, if Fran-

çoise had only known of this! But at last the happy and longed-for sound reached her ears.

"Mademoiselle Dupuis," called Madame, and Françoise, shaking not a little, went up the long room. There was a letter for her. She was right, she was safe. Her dearest dreams would be realised.

"Ha, ha, Muriel St. John!" she muttered under her breath. "With all your grandeur and your crushing haughtiness, you have little power *now* to stay my hand."

The said hand of Françoise shook so much when she held it out for her letter that the letter itself fell on the floor. She stooped to pick it up, her ears tingling, the tip of her nose growing painfully red. But alas, as she stooped she saw the direction on the letter and also the postmark. The letter came not from Lyon, but straight from Paris, and it was in the writing of *le bon père,* the *avocat.*

A sickening disappointment took possession of her. She crushed the letter into her pocket and returned to her seat. How strange of M. Paul Gérusez not to have written! But perhaps he was coming—he might come at any minute. If so, all would—all must be well. But how much better if he had only written. And then *le bon père,* as Jeanne called him, had not even sent a line to his little daughter. Françoise felt a good deal puzzled and distressed.

CHAPTER XII.

THE NEW MAMAN.

Prayers were over, and those girls who had received letters were busily engaged perusing them. Hope had called Jeanne Gérusez to her side, and as she read her own letters, she volunteered little bits of information to the excited and happy girl. Hope's present object was to keep her as much away from Françoise as was possible. Françoise, seeing that she was not wanted, went into the tiny bower which was meant for two, and languidly opened her father's letter. It was stiff and formal, as were all the letters written by the clever *avocat.* Its words were couched in the following terms, which must be translated for the benefit of the English reader:

My dear, dear Françoise:—

I write to you to impart information. By this same post there goes also a letter to Madame la Comtesse which will acquaint her with the fact that I am now about to tell you. *Mon enfant,* it pleased the Almighty to remove your dear mother at your birth. For long years I've lived a solitary man alone; but now Françoise, *ma fille,* I propose to give you a second mother and to take to myself a second wife. The lady is herself a widow and is of suitable age.

She brings with her a very considerable fortune, and I can take a larger house and live in better style. I will not at present acquaint you with the name she bore, for that is not of the slightest importance to you. For, at the time when you are reading this, she will be to you your *chère maman* and my beloved wife. I write this letter on my way to the marriage feast. You will not hear from me again, Françoise, for some little time, as I shall be enjoying my honeymoon with my beloved new wife. But my daughter, as you may require money, I enclose herewith an order on the bank at Tourelle for two hundred francs. This you can draw on as you require it. I shall not be at home at the festive season of Christmas; I am therefore making arrangements with Madame la Comtesse to keep you at the School. It is possible that at *Mi-Carême* I may invite you to meet your new mamma in Paris. Until then, adieu. Accept all felicitations for your happiness, and believe me,

Your ever devoted father,

André Dupuis.

The letter would have dropped from Françoise's cold and trembling hands but for the little precious enclosure, which made her the happy possessor of two hundred francs. Otherwise she felt nearly wild. A perfectly physical hatred of her father rose up in her heart. She was smitten to the very core of her being. Had he not whenever he did speak to her, alluded at least to her mother with love and affection; and now—oh, now—what *could* this mean? She felt as though something or someone had frozen

her. She hardly knew how to contain her own emotions. She did not hear the great gong sound within the house, the gong which was the signal for all demoiselles to enter the classrooms for lessons. She was, in short, oblivious to all sounds, beyond the horrible beating of her own heart, caused by the news which was brought to her. She—she—Françoise—was cast defenceless, without one friend, on this great School; and she could not even go home for the merry time of *Noël.* She must stay at the dull, dull school all through the detestable holidays. But did she ever want to go home again? Was there any home for her now that *maman—maman,* as her father called her, had come to fill her place, to share her life, to render all the old things which suddenly assumed value in her eyes, impossible?

A gentle voice said:

"Mademoiselle Françoise," and looking up, she met the puzzled glance of the little French teacher, Mlle. Suzanne.

"But chèrie," exclaimed Mlle. Suzanne, "we are all assembled and lessons wait. Wilt thou not hurry, chèrie? Didst thou not hear the great gong sound for the assembling of the pupils? and M. Perrot, the dancing-master, has come all the way from Paris. *Vite, vite, mademoiselle j'implore;* thou wilt otherwise get into trouble."

"I care not," murmured Françoise, but she said the words in a whisper. She did not wish to confide her sorrows to Mlle. Suzanne.

In the course of that morning's work Françoise remembered, and even with a certain degree of pleasure, the fact that she was due to meet Muriel St. John in the rose garden during recess. Recess occupied from half an hour to three-quarters, according to the teachers who came from Paris; on this special day it would occupy three-quarters of an hour. The girls need not reassemble in their classrooms until twelve o'clock, *midi,* that hour of all hours, when a short task was given preparatory to *déjeuner.* Françoise, who had loathed the idea of meeting Muriel once again, who had fondly hoped to confront Muriel with M. Paul Gérusez, now even felt a sense of relief. Anything to distract her attention—anything to keep her thoughts away from *le père et maman. Maman,* she should never be *her maman,* never, never, never! The girl so far absolutely forgot her anticipated triumph in the School; the joy of crushing Jeanne, of destroying that so-called *no* secret which was assuredly a secret of the very greatest; that she hardly bore it in mind at all. As the morning lessons came to an end she hurried, however, to keep her appointment with Muriel.

At the further end of the old world rose garden, that garden so beloved by the nuns, so carefully tended by them, was a little bower which in summertime was one mass of honeysuckle. The blossoms of the honeysuckle had long passed away, and most of the leaves lay in withered confusion on the ground. The little place looked bare, uninviting and ear-

wiggy; but outside in the sunshine a few late roses still blossomed. Françoise, notwithstanding her peculiar and complex character, had a passion for roses, and she now stooped to smell one in order to take in the delicious perfume. None of the girls were allowed to pick any of the flowers in the rose garden—they were all considered sacred to Madame la Comtesse. Now as Françoise bent forward and inhaled the perfume of the rose, a neatly-dressed, piquant little figure advanced quickly towards her; and Muriel St. John, wearing dark brown to-day instead of mauve, stood by her side. From the outer garden she had secured a large crimson rose and a piece of late heliotrope. These she had fastened into the front of her dress, giving thereby the last perfection to the neatness and correctness of her costume. There was something, however, in the expression of Françoise's face which caused Muriel St. John to do something which she was certainly not noted for doing—in short, to give up something for the sake of another.

"You love flowers, *n'est-ce pas, mademoiselle?*" she said.

"Ah, oui," answered Françoise, "I adore them."

"And," continued Muriel, "you are sniffing the perfume of the *last rose of summer.* Is it not so? But behold! here is another last rose. Wilt thou accept it, mademoiselle, from me?"

Francoise gazed at Muriel in a sort of stupid wonder.

Quick as thought Muriel unpinned her little bunch of flowers and transferred them to Françoise's dress, placing them there deftly and gracefully.

"Ah, ah, but they suit you," she said. "You love the flowers and you should always wear the flowers. They bring out your—your *points, n'est-ce pas?*"

"I don't know and I don't care," said Françoise.

"We ought never to say 'we don't know and we don't care,'" replied Muriel. "Shall we continue our conversation broken off somewhat abruptly last night? Perhaps I was rude to you last night, Françoise Dupuis. If so, I am sorry. I have what is called in England a 'shocking temper.' You must forgive me when it flares up."

Françoise still looked dull, stupid, uninterested.

"Now, listen, pray," said Muriel, "for I have something of great importance to confide to you. My news need never be known; but if it ever is known, it will electrify and by no means pleasingly, certain fair maidens in the School. For instance, there is your friend, Jeanne Gérusez."

"She is *not* my friend," interrupted Françoise. "I hate and despise her; she is a treacherous and mean demoiselle. Do not talk to me of her, mademoiselle, I implore. Her very name rouses my worst passions."

"But suppose," said Muriel, speaking very softly, "suppose, for the sake of argument, that *you* obtained—nay more, that *you* are *offered* a position which *she covets,* a position which she—yes, she

begged for, and was — yes, was *refused.* How would that do, Françoise Dupuis? How would that suit the feelings of your sore heart?"

Françoise's dull and ugly eyes glittered with a strange light. For a moment she did not say a word, then she spoke with a sort of breathless rush.

"I do not understand you, Muriel St. John; but anything that humiliates Jeanne Gérusez must of necessity give me pleasure."

"Ah, I thought so, I hoped so," said Muriel. She laid her delicate hand very lightly on the French girl's arm.

"I am going to speak to you from my heart," she said; "and what I say to you now I say in confidence, which I trust to your honour not to repeat."

"My honour will stand the strain, I assure you," replied Françoise, her sorrows for the time forgotten, and her excitement wildly to the fore.

"*Bon, c'est bon,*" exclaimed Muriel. "No girl would speak as you have done, with any thought of betrayal. Now then, *attendez-vous?* I have consulted with my fellows. I do what I do with their consent and desire. You have got hold, Françoise Dupuis, of a little bit of a secret—a little bit, not much; not enough to do us or yourself either harm or good. Now, I am willing to confide in you still further, on the sole and absolute condition that you regard my words as sacred and repeat them to no one. Clearly understand, to no one?"

"I will not repeat a single word you say to me," replied Françoise.

"I believe you," answered Muriel; "I believe that you can help us. You wanted to injure us, *n'est-ce pas?* but that could not be. Now then, listen. Listen attentively and for all you are worth. We *have* a secret; there *is* a Society; and I ask you now, in my own name and in the name of the other members, to join that Society, to become one of us, Françoise, to aid us, to abide by our rules. *Your* object was to crush us, but *our* object is to uplift you. The very nicest girls in the School belong. Will you belong? Jeanne Gérusez figuratively went on her knees to us to join, but we refused her utterly and completely. We *invite* you to join; will you join?"

"I—I—I can scarcely believe my ears," said Françoise. "You offer me, a comparative stranger, what you refused to Jeanne. There must assuredly be a motive in this. What is the motive, Muriel St. John?"

Muriel burst into a ringing laugh.

"Ah," she said, "but you are wise, Françoise Dupuis, and you will suit us to a nicety. We want—yes, we want one like you. I can tell you nothing further until the night of your initiation, except—except one thing, and that thing is of very grave importance. No one can become a member without putting down the *argent.* How much money can you spare to us, Françoise Dupuis?"

Françoise thought of the note which her father

had sent her—the note by means of which she could draw on the bank at Tourelle to the amount of two hundred francs.

"I am not rich," she said slowly, for she also could be careful if she chose, "but my father—my father to-day sent me some money."

"How much?" asked Muriel in a voice choking with eagerness.

"He has not sent me a great deal," continued Françoise; "and as I am not returning home for Christmas, as I anticipated, I must keep some for my own personal use. My father has just married again and will not be in Paris at Christmas. This is a very bitter grief to me, and please, I do not wish it commented on. He says I may join him and—and—his wife at *Mi-Carême*. In the meantime I have to live. If I approve of your Society, I can let you have one hundred francs, and doubtless from time to time more; but that is all for the present."

"That will suffice," replied Muriel. "One hundred francs on the day of your initiation, which will be to-morrow evening. The initiation will be quiet, without any pomp and ceremony, but you will be of use to us and I do not think you will again complain of not being wanted at the School." As Muriel said the last words she walked quickly away, and Françoise stood feeling a little stunned and vastly excited. It mattered nothing at all to her now, should M. Paul Gérusez arrive; nay, more, she knew that if he did come, she must by hook or by crook throw dust into

his eyes. For was she not herself about to become a member of that Society which had refused the membership of Jeanne, his child? Yes, she was glad, she was excited. She must be very careful to hold her tongue. But life from being cold and dull became suddenly flecked all over with sunshine, and she knew that even her father's second marriage could not keep her from enjoying an intense and rare excitement which ran like wine through her veins.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MYSTERY OF THE FIVE FRANCS.

The initiation of Françoise Dupuis to the membership of the *Société de Joie* was after all but a very simple affair. There was no grandeur, there was no fête of any sort. The members of the *Société* were, however, present, wearing on this occasion their plain everyday dress. The old front attic was undecorated and looked dull in the late gloom of the November afternoon. One or two candles had been placed on an old box, but otherwise the place was almost in darkness. Nevertheless the members arrived as was requested, and it was at the different faces of the said members that Françoise eagerly—most eagerly looked. She could just see them in the gloaming. Whatever the plainness of her own features, her eyesight was at least excellent. And she recognised with extreme pleasure the well-known features of some of the best known and most highly-esteemed girls in the School. There was, for instance, Comtesse Caterina de Mori; there was Mlle. Alain de St. Aignan; there was Mlle. Juliette de Tournay; there was Mlle. Marguerite de Marni; and there were those two striking looking, classical girls, Gemma Ravella and Imelda Olivetta. Seated also, somewhat

crouched up in a corner, could be seen the bright face and neat little figure of Edmée Leroux. There were many other girls also present, girls who were essential to the *Société,* but who do not take an active part in this story. Françoise was led into the midst of the room by Muriel St. John. She looked around her with satisfaction. Then her eyes lighted upon Edmée, and a frown swept across her brow. She took no more notice of Edmée than if she were dirt. Up to the present she had thought it a great compliment to be invited to join that *Société* which had refused to admit Jeanne Gérusez. But where was the compliment, after all, when such a girl as Edmée Leroux, the daughter of a vine-grower at Tourelle, was present? Muriel looked at Françoise and seemed to read her thoughts like an open book. Muriel smiled one of those very slight satirical smiles which she and Caterina seemed to keep between them. She then proceeded quickly to business. She informed the other demoiselles that Françoise Dupuis wished to become a member of *Le Société de Joie,* that she had expressed her willingness to conform to the rules of the said *Société,* and that on the present occasion she was prepared to take upon herself the necessary vows and to go through the necessary initiation. The vows, after all, were simple enough. Muriel read them quickly aloud in French, and, with her pretty English accent, gave them a certain grace which added to the charm even of that most charming language. The *novitiate* must con-

form to the vows, or she could not possibly become a member. She must swear solemnly to absolute and complete obedience to the Committee. Here Muriel paused and pointed to a row of girls who were seated on an old bench at a little distance.

"Comtesse Caterina de Mori," she exclaimed, "Mlle. Alain de St. Aignan, Mlle. Edmée Leroux."

Françoise started, and a deep frown passed over her face.

Muriel continued as though she had seen neither start nor frown.

"Mlle. Marguerite de Marni, Mlle. Juliette de Tournay, Signorina Gemma Ravella, and Signorina Imelda Olivetta."

To the laws laid down by this Committee, Françoise must absolutely bow. She must submit herself; she must do exactly what they told her without murmur or hesitation. This Committee was, as far as her connexion with the Society was concerned, to be her absolute ruler.

The next vow Françoise was to take was that of absolute and complete secrecy. Were she indeed so unworthy as to let out a syllable of what went on at their meetings, their fêtes, their various entertainments, she would be hounded out of their midst with contumely.

The *Société* consisted of 30 members. They greatly hoped that the members would soon reach 32. That would include Françoise herself and the young English Mees, Joyce Selby. Would Françoise, or

would she not, take these two vows? Françoise expressed her readiness to do so. Immediately on saying this, she was surrounded by the entire group of the Committee, who one and all commanded that she should solemnly and in the presence of the rest of the *Société* kiss their left hands in token of her fealty. This she also did without apparent hesitation, although Muriel, who was watching her closely, observed that she hardly touched the little hand of Edmée.

Muriel immediately now changed her tone. The solemnity vanished from her voice, she became gay and even cheerful. She took from her pocket a little green velvet bag, and opening it, brought it up to Françoise. Françoise immediately dropped therein 5 golden napoleons. There came a sort of pleasure to her heart as she heard the tinkle of gold against gold. Whatever they might think of her, she was dealing handsomely with the Society. Having received her entrance fee, Muriel stepped back a pace and whispered a few words into the ears of Caterina.

"You now belong to us," said the Comtesse; "and we will treat you accordingly. As a reward for obeying our commands, we will ourselves give you our full confidence. Do not, pray, imagine from the present appearance of the room that it looks like this on the night of a great fête. That is very far from being the case. The initiation of a new member is a trivial affair, but the enthroning of a queeu is a very great affair, and we hope to enthrone our new

queen on next Tuesday fortnight." The Comtesse then proceeded to enlighten Françoise with regard to the programme of the *Société de Joie.* It was, as she expressed, great, grand, magnifique; above all things, it was secret. Ah, *mais oui,* very secret. She explained to Françoise that once each year a Queen was chosen with great éclat and amid great rejoicings. The young Queen they now hoped to secure was that most beautiful and most wealthy young Mees—Joyce Selby of England.

She had already been present at one of their fêtes, and although she had not actually promised to join the *Société,* she had all but done so. Yes, they felt practically *sure* of Joyce. For a whole year she would reign over them; and with her money, her beauty, her charm, she would lead the *Société* through a season of fun and great rejoicing.

Every member, even the members of the all-powerful Committee, must bow to the Queen. She came first of all; her word was law—yes, law of the most supreme; she was their liege lady, their sovereign. The stately young Comtesse then went on to explain to Françoise a general sketch of their proceedings, telling Françoise that she would be permitted to enquire more fully into the rules, from her own very dear friend, Mlle. Marguerite de Marni, who would give her a book containing the cipher of the Society, which cipher she could very quickly acquire. The Comtesse, in her haughty young way, now pronounced the meeting at an end.

"You can go if you like," she said to the new member; "but clearly understand that you *belong,* and to reveal even the ghost of one of our secrets will mean for you a fate which is far, far worse than being expelled from the School."

"I have promised to obey, I have promised to be faithful—I will obey, I will be faithful," said Françoise in a choking sort of voice; then she left the attic, followed, however, immediately by Marguerite de Marni.

The rest of the girls looked at each other.

"She will be useful, she will do our dirty work," said Muriel in a low, contented tone, which was only heard by the Comtesse and by Edmée Leroux, who was standing near. "We have always hitherto wanted someone of her sort," continued Muriel; "and she has subscribed handsomely for her right of admission. Five *napoléons!* It is a considerable sum and puts us in funds once again."

"But what have you yourself subscribed?" exclaimed Juliette de Tournay, glancing up at Muriel as she spoke. '"Remember we have a great deal of expense to undergo immediately, and no time to lose."

Muriel looked significantly at the girls who did *not* belong to the Committee and yet formed part of the Society. "We are in funds," she repeated, as the said girls took the hint and left the attic. "I have contributed my *dot*"—she did not mention that

her dot consisted of five *francs*—" and La Comtesse Caterina——"

"I paid two *napoleons* towards the fund this morning," said the Comtesse. "But now what is it, Edmée, child? Why do you look at us out of your large brown eyes?" She spoke almost with affection to the little daughter of the vine-grower.

Edmée coloured deeply and then put a small packet into the hand of Comtesse Caterina, whom she loved.

"This also contains five *napoleons,*" she said, "which is, I think, the sum given by Françoise Dupuis for the right of membership. Take the money, *chères demoiselles,* take it one and all, with the whole heart and love of Edmée Leroux, who will be faithful to you and to the Society until the death. *Mon cher père, me l'a donné hier soir, quand je suis allée le voir. Mon pére,* he say to me—*Petite Edmée,* the vines prosper, and behold! there is more from whence this came. Ah! but he is not ashamed of his good trade, is *mon père.*"

"Nor of you, Edmée; I should think not," said the Comtesse. "We accept your present and we thank your worthy father—is it not so, Muriel?"

"It is indeed so," answered Muriel. "We are now truly in funds."

"Shall we here and now count the contents of the green velvet bag?" asked the Comtesse.

But this very natural desire was very far from Muriel's wishes. She did not wish her shabby five francs to be noticed and commented on. There was,

however, no withstanding Comtesse Caterina's haughty and determined manner and the golden napoléons lay in a goodly heap on the little makeshift table.

"But what are these?" said Caterina, flicking the five francs aside with a disdainful finger.

Muriel turned crimson. "I know not," she said, "there must be a mistake. Or perhaps a member of *La Société, très pauvre, vous comprenez,* has dropped in this little offering out of gratitude."

"I do not see YOUR *napoléon* or *napoléons,*" said Caterina.

"I have them in my room, I will fetch them," said Muriel.

"It would be well," said Caterina, in her haughtiest voice.

Muriel, inwardly glowering with anger, was forced to retire for the purpose. She had lost, indeed, by her mean little trick, as her offering now to the funds of the impoverished Society must, if she would keep up her credit, amount to forty-five *francs,* and five of these *francs* would be supposed to be the offering of someone else. But there was no help for it. She returned quickly with the money, which she placed on the table. La Comtesse Caterina had a keen eye for finance, and wrote down on a slip of paper the exact amount which the bag contained. She then handed it again to Muriel.

"It may be necessary by and by, I do not say when, to seek a fresh treasurer," she remarked, and

the words smote on Muriel's proud spirit like gall and wormwood.

But all attention was directed away from the question of money and the little velvet bag by a remark made by Edmée Leroux. Edmée stepped a little forward, so that the dim light from one of the candles fell on her charming and sweet face.

"I love you all—all," she began, "and until the death—yes, until the death I will be faithful. I have taken vows, and those vows I will keep. But I never took a vow to belong interminably to the Society, and I wish now to proffer my resignation."

"But why! why! Edmée chèrie?" cried several distressed voices, for the little daughter of the vine-grower was a prime favourite in the Society.

"We cannot let you go, Edmée," exclaimed Muriel.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked La Comtesse.

"I had perhaps best tell you the meaning," said Edmée, raising her velvety brown eyes, and fixing them on the face of Comtesse Caterina. "You will of course, *chères demoiselles,* consider my words both secret and sacred. I am a poor little nobody, but you have treated me always—always, as one of yourselves; and I have been happy, very happy in your midst. But I cannot continue a member of that *Société* which has Françoise Dupuis as one of its associates. Ask me no reasons, kindest of friends, but go I must. Ah, but it is sorrow to me, and I will

be faithful—faithful unto the death; but go I must."

Without waiting for a single word of expostulation, little Edmée tripped out of the attic, closing the great door softly behind her. Her small feet were heard running down the broken stairs, and then there was silence while the members of the Committee glanced with extreme distress, with, indeed, bewilderment, from one to the other.

"Well," said the Comtesse at last, "we have exchanged one like *her*—one who, whatever her social rank, is pure and high and good as the angels are good, for one like Françoise Dupuis. I *admire* your taste, Muriel. Your deed of to-day has done mischief irreparable to the *Société de Joie* which only time will prove."

"This is terrible," whispered Muriel, "but we shall get her back, assuredly we shall get her back."

"Never!" replied the Comtesse. "With all your knowledge of human character, Muriel St. John, you do not know that of Edmée Leroux."

After uttering these words, the tall and stately young Comtesse bent forward and extinguished the lights, put the sconces out of sight in the deep cupboard, locked the door of the said cupboard, the key of which she gave to Muriel to keep; and then one by one, stricken, depressed, overcome, the Committee left the front attic, no longer with joyful steps. It was strange surely that the little daughter of a mere vine-grower should cause such commotion, such grief, in the very essence of the heart of the Com-

mittee, but such was most truly the case; for was not little Edmée one of those pure and simple beings who are trusted and loved wherever they go, and to whatever rank they belong?

It was on the afternoon of the next day, that Juliette de Tournay was called aside by the Comtesse and requested to explain the rules in all their minute fulness to Joyce Selby.

"You must take the opportunity," said the Comtesse, "of getting Joyce to understand the cipher. You must explain to her how all-important it is that she should become our Queen. You must disabuse her mind of any intention of shirking so grave a responsibility, and you must inform her that it is absolutely necessary for her to learn our very simple cipher, as only by means of the cipher can we write to each other—can we send messages of any sort whatsoever from one member of the *Société de Joie* to another member."

Juliette's great dark eyes were slightly reddened round the lids. She had, in fact, been crying a great deal at the defection of Edmée from their midst. Comtesse Caterina now gazed at her fully and fearlessly.

"Juliette, you have been crying."

"My heart is sore," said Juliette.

"But you must not think of your own heart on this occasion," remarked Caterina. "Understand that you who belong to a Society must live for the good of all, yes, all. Edmée has chosen to desert us.

Her desertion is sore and sad, and in my humble opinion Muriel behaved very badly when she introduced such a girl as Françoise into our midst. But remember what our present object is. It is to secure the services of the English maiden, Joyce Selby. There must not be a word breathed to her with regard to Edmée's withdrawal; neither must there be a word mentioned to her concerning the new member, Françoise. When she is a member we will naturally confide in her, adhere to her decisions, do her wishes. But now the time has come for you to speak to her, Juliette. Take the opportunity this evening. Do not delay, but meet her somewhere as though by accident in the grounds. Then invite her to join you; tell her what your motive is, show her the book of cipher. You and she can read it in the little honeysuckle arbour in the rose garden. But remember, we have faithfully promised in no way to *compel* her sovereignty. She comes to us freely or not at all; for my part I think she will come, and, oh, she will make such a beautiful—such a *lovely,* perfect queen. She is full of resource; she will raise the *Société de Joie* into something better, greater, higher than it has ever been. We must not—we dare not—lose her; and yet there is a possibility, perhaps only the ghost of one, that she may prefer to keep her absolute independence, to be bound by no rules or no vows. You can find out if such will be the case without appearing to ask for information."

"Yes, I can find out," replied Juliette; "but I

own," she added, "that I do not like the task. Comtesse"—here she clutched Caterina's arm—"ah," she continued, "we are safe, we are alone. Comtesse, can you understand the mystery of those five francs?"

"Don't ask me, don't question me," said Comtesse Caterina.

"Ah, Comtesse," said Juliette, "your thoughts are as my thoughts; but if our heads—the very heads of our Committee—fail us, where are we?"

"Where indeed?" said the Comtesse appealingly. "But never mind," she added, "all will be well if we secure our queen."

CHAPTER XIV.

CONING'S TOWER.

In the early days of this story it may be recollected that the young English girl, Joyce Selby, had a private interview of some importance with Madame la Comtesse. Madame looked with some astonishment at the girl as she spoke. For this girl, unlike most of her fellows, wished to assume the garb of poverty. She wanted, in fact, to appear at La Chapelle as a poor, not a rich, girl. Now Madame la Comtesse could not personally sanction such a proceeding. She had no undue reverence for money, but she undoubtedly looked on great possessions as a gift, and she also felt that in the case of one like Joyce Selby—one who was not only rich, very rich, but also extremely beautiful and extremely talented; one in whose own veins flowed the blood of ancestors both noble and in every sense of the word great—she could scarcely realise her desires. But Madame la Comtesse was a Frenchwoman. And being French, she did not care to put the *onus* of what Joyce had begged for on her own shoulders. The thought flashed through her mind that Miss Tabor was the woman for her purpose. She would accordingly send for Miss Tabor, talk to her confidentially, and get

Miss Tabor in fact to tackle this young recalcitrant, and get her to see how more than silly, how in fact wrong, were her ideas. Madame la Comtesse, it has been said, was French; but Miss Tabor was English. She was honourable, true, upright. A lie to her was something horrible. To appear before others as anyone but what you were was to Miss Tabor sinful. Perhaps this English mistress was a trifle hard, but anyhow she failed to understand the motives of Joyce Selby. She even spoke with some heat and anger when Madame revealed to her the subject of the young girl's desire.

"It is wrong and unnecessary," she said, "and I for one refuse to have anything to do with it."

On hearing these words Madame la Comtesse poured out the vials of her wrath on Miss Tabor.

"The girl is by birth noble," she said; "and by nature noble. It is impossible for me to accede to her request, but I thought perhaps you might open her eyes."

"And why not yourself, Madame?" asked the English teacher.

Madame thought for a minute. Then she said with the subtlety of her race:

"You must remember, Miss Tabor, that at present Joyce Selby is new to the School, and in particular new to the French tongue. I can speak English, it is true, but English is not my native language. Now it is yours. Will you, therefore, as a personal favour, explain the true position of affairs

to this brave young Mees, and get her to see where she really stands—where she must stand—in the School?"

"I will try, of course, in order to oblige you, Madame," replied the teacher, who felt, however, that an ugly and unnecessary task was put upon her. She left the presence of Madame and as this was the hour of recess, went immediately to seek for Joyce. She was a downright, plain-spoken woman, and when she had to undertake anything unpleasant, she thought no time like the present. She quickly found Joyce and Hope chatting together in that absolutely intimate way which girls, English girls, who have known each other all their lives, and who are also connected by a near relationship, indulge in. Miss Tabor tapped Joyce lightly on the shoulder.

"I have a word to say to you, Joyce Selby," she remarked, and without even glancing at Hope, who was in reality a prime favourite of hers, she carried the new girl off to her own private room.

Joyce had been feeling excited after that wonderful fête of the evening before. The eager words of the girls had dazzled and almost confused her. She was a little, in fact, off her head with regard to the subject of the proposed sovereignty. Never—never before in the course of her whole young life had words so sweet, so flattering, and at the same time so apparently sincere, been addressed to her! She longed inexpressibly to confide her own sensations, and to make a full confidence, to Hope Ashley. But

this she was under a vow not to do. In short, she had given her word, and her word, to English Joyce Selby, was worth a thousand vows. Was it not, as she herself expressed it, her bond?

She wondered now why Miss Tabor required her presence, but accompanied her without a word. It was the rule at the great school of La Chapelle to provide each teacher with her own small sitting-room, and Miss Tabor now threw open the door and motioned to the English girl to precede her into the room. Unlike most of the other rooms in the old convent, this room was essentially a *home*. It was the home of the English teacher. There was nothing whatever French about it. It had soft, white muslin curtains draped at the windows; equally soft moss-green felt covered the whole floor. There was a shelf full of English books; a desk of English make; chairs which had also come from England; and the few photographs which were scattered on the tables were of English men and women. The pictures on the walls were original water colours depicting English scenes. Joyce gave a sudden, almost sharp little cry as she entered this room, for directly staring her in the face was an extremely well-done water colour by an artist of some repute. It was, in short, a picture of Coning's Tower Castle, with Warwick Castle and Guy's Cliff in the distance. But the foreground was principally occupied by Coning's Tower itself. Coning's Tower! Joyce's own most beloved home. Tears brimmed up to the girl's eyes; the whole scene

was so familiar—the long, low, castellated house with its ruined tower at the further end; its high, wide bay windows; its balconies overhead; its smoothly kept lawns; its flower-beds; a man mowing in the distance; a girl standing with her hand flung over the neck of an old brown pony.

"Miss Tabor," exclaimed Joyce, "is it possible that you know my home?"

"I was born in the village near by," said Miss Tabor, "but I left the place when I was very young. I've always loved it, however; loved the memory of the castle which goes by the name of Coning's Tower; and once, some years ago, I asked a very clever and rising young artist to paint this picture for me. He did so, and would not charge me anything. When my mother died some years ago, the last look in her dying eyes was directed towards Coning's Tower."

"Oh, don't—oh, don't tell me any more," said Joyce. She suddenly sank into a chair, and proud, reserved English girl that she was, burst into tears.

Miss Tabor took no notice whatever of her tears. She was far too wise for that. After a time, however, she brought her a glass of cold water, and then laid her hand gently and tenderly on the girl's shoulder.

"My picture has startled you," she said; "I meant it to, for I have seen Madame la Comtesse, and Madame tells me that you wish while in this School to disown your noble property, to refuse to be considered what you really are—the owner of

Coning's Tower. I do not know what your reason is, but I wish to say plainly and directly that in so acting and so doing, Joyce Selby, you are untrue to the memory of your forefathers, and to the home of your possession. Why do you fear wealth? Is it not, rightly used, a very great gift? God has given you much; why do you refuse to accept the best—the very best of all?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Joyce; "you upset me very much when you talk as you do. Will you permit me to explain myself?"

"Of course; I am here for the purpose," said Miss Tabor.

"It is like this," said Joyce, speaking slowly and with a certain deliberation. "I am more or less impressed, since I came to this School, by the undue value placed upon money by most of the girls. I am received here with extreme kindness, with every possible show of courtesy and respect. Why is this, Miss Tabor, why? There is a girl in the School, Jeanne Gérusez is her name, and because she happens not to be born in as high a position as I am, she is nowhere, she is nothing. Now I choose to rank with girls like Jeanne Gérusez and Edmee Leroux. I want, while I am at School, to find the level of myself, independent of my wealth and my birth. I spoke to Madame la Comtesse on the subject; she said she would do what she could. She has doubtless spoken to you on the matter."

"She has," replied Miss Tabor, "and I have come from her now."

"She has asked you to speak to me?" queried Joyce.

"She has."

"Before you begin to speak, dear Miss Tabor," said Joyce, "may I put, as far as I am able, my case before you? There is no doubt whatever that I am already reputed in the School to be rich; and just because of that fact honours are thrust on me, even greatness—that which schoolgirls call greatness—is placed in my hands. I do not wish for honours so given, nor greatness so implied. I want, if it is possible, to remain while at School, outside Coning's Tower. I want, while I am at School, to be a poor English girl, not a rich English girl."

"You have spoken," said Miss Tabor, "and now let me assure you that you do, in my opinion, extremely wrong. In the first place, you cannot deny that God has given you a great deal more than wealth. He has given you charm, beauty and talent. If it were only mere wealth these girls desire, why should they turn from Jeanne Gérusez? For her father's income is doubtless very nearly as large as that which you derive from Coning's Tower. You deliberately hold as a secret which is perhaps shared by Hope Ashley—that I cannot say—that you are the owner of one of the proudest and most noble places in England. And do you think even for a moment, Joyce Selby, that in a great School like

this, filled with inquisitive girls, you are likely to *keep* your secret. In an English school such might be barely possible; but not in a French School, my dear pupil, where the principal object of the demoiselles is to hunt out secrets and fathom mysteries. At any moment of any day, a French girl may come into this room, may see this picture, and may recognise you, yes *you,* standing by your pony's side. But enough of that. I would urge you, if I might venture to urge you, to keep your true position and make no fuss of any sort about it. Wear it humbly as a jewel of great price. Show to the demoiselles here, and the English girls here, that you are, yes, you are without fear and without reproach, and a maiden who knows how to spend her wealth worthily."

"Then I am to confess to my riches?" said Joyce in a faltering voice.

"You are neither to confess nor to deny. You are to accept an established fact. You are rich, you are of noble birth, one of your ancestors, many years ago now, married a Spanish lady from whom you inherit your dark eyes and jet black hair, also your slightly dark complexion. In fact, Joyce, that touch of the sun about you which makes you so altogether fascinating. Now, listen, my dear child, my beloved mother told me when I was quite a little child all about that sweet lady. She had no fortune except her looks; she came to Coning's Tower as governess, and the heir to the property fell in love with her and

married her. She was one of the sweetest women who ever lived, she was your great-grandmother. From that moment, the children of the race of Selby were dark instead of fair; but none were so dark or so brilliant in beauty as yourself. You owe this privilege to your great-grandmother. Now, I would beg of you, while at the School, to recall to mind what some very old people in the village still remember—her kindness, her sweetness, her dignity. How freely she gave of her wealth where it was needed; how careful she was not to waste her husband's money. But do you think she would hide that which was so honourable and worthy? Far, indeed, would that have been from her, Joyce. You can do much, very much, with your wealth; but do not lock it up. Use it, use it always in helping the cause of right; in doing the true and the best while you are at School. You wear a triple armour, my dear, fair maid of England—beauty, talent, wealth. Gird yourself with all three, don't dispense with any if you would do well. Have I spoken in vain, my child? Have I hurt your feelings?"

"No, no, no," cried Joyce. She ran up to Miss Tabor and flung her arms round her neck. "Sometimes the burden is a little too heavy," she said, "but I see plainly by your words, dear Miss Tabor, that I was only acting the coward's part when I wanted to resign some of it. I will carry all—yes, all—and as bravely as I can." She dashed some fresh tears

from her sparkling bright eyes and hastily left the room.

"God bless her," thought the English teacher, "she is most truly worthy, and I—I will help her all I can. God grant she does not get with the wrong set. But she must fight her own battles. How excited I was when I knew she was coming! Little Joyce Selby of Coning's Tower! Used I not to dream about that baby creature when I myself was a girl! Yes, I must see more of her, and I must talk to Hope about her. She must be guarded, she must be guided, she must be helped. And yet there is nothing weak about Joyce—it is but to look into those glorious dark eyes of hers to see the truth of that. Joyce is strong with the strength of the truly brave; but I will help her, yes, help her all I can."

Joyce herself on that occasion went slowly back to Hope, who was waiting for her in a certain niche which the girl had chosen for herself in one of the corridors at La Chapelle. It was, in short, that very niche where Jeanne Gérusez had hidden on the night of the fête—that niche where the image of the late Mother Superior used to stand with hands uplifted, blessing her children. Joyce had seen that very same niche occupied early on the morning of that very day; but now she scarcely cared to think about the very early morning, and the niche looked so different in the light of day that she absolutely failed to recognise it. Hope was, of course, not promoted to a sitting-room of her own, and the bedrooms were only

used in the case of illness. Hope used to bring from her own room a couple of low chairs and a tiny table, and there she used to sit when the weather was cold, the light falling full on her sweet, noble face as she stitched at her various embroideries, or read her innumerable books. The niche was always emptied before night; and as a rule the second chair during the day was occupied by someone, for Hope, notwithstanding all Muriel's machinations, still held sovereignty of right over wrong in the School. She raised her eyes now as Joyce approached. Joyce sat down near her and immediately began to whisper in her ear the whole account of her interview with Miss Tabor. She described the startling effect of the water colour sketch of her own home. She told Hope what she had hitherto kept as a secret, what her own wish and desire had been, namely, to appear in the School as other girls. Hope gave one of her brilliant and sudden smiles when Joyce said that.

"The idea is so like you, Joyce," she said. "You were always that romantic sort of girl. But now tell me what Miss Tabor thought of it."

Joyce proceeded to give a full account of her interview. She described her start when she saw the picture of her own home hanging in Miss Tabor's charming little sitting-room. She described fully how overcome she was by this peep at a semblance of the beloved old place.

"And I was there, *I* was there, Hope," she continued, "with my hand on Bob's neck. Darling

Bob! he is buried in the paddock now, with a little tombstone put up to him. I chose his epitaph: 'BOB—MY OWN PONY, FAITHFUL AND TRUE.' It nearly cut me to the heart to see him standing in the foreground of the picture, Hope dear."

"I am not surprised," answered Hope, "and is—is that all?"

"Oh, no, no, not all. My friend, Miss Tabor, used to live in the village near the Castle when she was a child; and she and her mother both loved Coning's Tower. And when her mother was dying the last thing her eyes rested on was the ancient home of my forefathers. Miss Tabor would not let me give it up or repudiate it; she spoke very strong words, Hope. Oh, Hope, was I right to yield to her?"

"You did yield to her?" replied Hope.

"Yes, I felt I had to; was I right?"

"Of course you were right, you darling, silly, romantic Joyce. How could you possibly act in any other way? You *are* Miss Selby of Coning's Tower, and you cannot get away from the fact; and, oh—oh—I am proud of you, Joyce, for I love you, Joyce; not one little bit because you are rich, but because you are yourself."

CHAPTER XV.

ENTHRONED.

The days sped on rapidly, as days will when every moment is full of interest and excitement. Whatever the private thoughts may have been that dwelt in the heart of Joyce Selby, she never uttered them to mortal. It is true that Juliette de Tournay took her aside on a certain afternoon, and read the various and minor rules of the *Société de Joie*. She read them to the English girl from her little book of cipher. She explained the cipher fully to Joyce, told her how extremely simple it was, and how easy it would be for her to acquire the knowledge of its use. She explained fully to Joyce that the cipher was the only means of communication employed by the members of the *Société*. They could, when they were initiated, write to each other in cipher. All messages from the Committee to the members must be communicated by means of the cipher. Joyce listened, with her beautiful dark eyes fixed on Juliette's face. It was by no means her way to speak impulsively, and on the present occasion she was silent and grave as a young judge.

Juliette fully expected to have numerous questions

put to her, but Joyce did not put one. When at last the cipher had been fully explained, the rules absolutely expounded, Juliette rose from her seat. Then Joyce rose also and spoke.

"When I was with you at your fête, I was given three weeks to decide whether I would refuse or accept the great honour vouchsafed to me. There is a week of that time yet to run. Your next meeting will be on to-morrow week."

Juliette nodded, while her eager, black eyes grew very bright.

"I now want to say something," continued Joyce, "and I may as well say it to you, Juliette de Tournay, giving you full permission to repeat my words to the other members of the Committee. I was faithfully promised three weeks for thought, for decision. During that time I was not to be in any way pressed. Nothing was to be said for the Society and nothing against it. That promise made to me has so far been carefully kept. I have not been in any way interfered with, and I thoroughly respect the reticence of those girls who have left me alone. I shall be present in the great front attic at midnight of to-morrow week; more than that I cannot at present say, but I think I should like to ask you, and I think perhaps you will be allowed to enlighten me, with regard to the duties of a Queen, should I indeed undertake that great honour. For listen, pray, Juliette, I am not asked to become a *member* of the *Société de Joie*—that in itself would be something

—nor am I asked to become a member of the Committee—which would be a yet greater thing—but I am asked—I, a total stranger; an English girl—to be your Queen, your head. Juliette, I am told you were once a Queen of this same *Société;* will you enlighten me a little with regard to my duties?"

"Gladly," replied Juliette.

She sat down once more and drew Joyce to seat herself by her side.

"As Queen, Joyce Selby, you make your own rules—you go your own way. With the single and sole exception of keeping our little society a secret, you can do as you think best and well."

"I can, for instance, if I like, do *good?*" said Joyce very gravely.

"*Mais, oui, certainement,*" said Juliette, opening her big black eyes.

"I was anxious to be sure on that point," said Joyce. "You call your society *la Société de Joie,* but is it a Society that gives joy to others as well as ourselves?"

"The Queen can do as she pleases," replied Juliette in a puzzled tone; "the Queen can do just as she pleases."

"You are certain?"

"Positive," replied Juliette.

"Thank you. I don't think I want to hear any more. I'm greatly obliged."

Juliette left her companion with a puzzled feeling in her heart. She was extremely uncertain in

her own mind whether Joyce Selby was exactly the Queen they required. That evening she whispered her doubts both to Muriel and to the Comtesse de Mori. Both girls laughed at her. The Comtesse laid her hand lightly on her shoulder.

"You are a little *oie,* Juliette," she said. "The Queen is Queen, and has absolute authority, but think you not, silly child, there is such a thing as enfolding her in our meshes—in giving her a *little* rope, but not *all* the rope?"

"Believe me," said Muriel, bursting in on the Comtesse's words, "that Joyce is the very Queen we require. Her stately beauty, her rank, her wealth, will raise our Society to a pitch of excellence which it never before reached."

"And you think—you think she will join, *chère petite* Juliette?"

"Yes, I think she will join," said Juliette; "but—but from a wrong motive. We seek for pleasure *in* our Society, for pleasure pure and simple. We seek for our *own* pleasure, *comprenez-vous?* She, that English maid, seeks for the pleasure of *others.* Is it wise to make her our Queen?"

"It is quite wise," said Muriel. "Leave it in the hands of those who know more than you do, little Juliette. But, ah, *ma foi!* the fête for the initiation of our Queen must be a truly great and brilliant one."

During the remainder of the week, active preparations went on in that secret attic where the rats were

supposed to scamper and where it was reported that the Mother Superior had been seen to glide. No expense was spared to make this fête something wonderful and exceptional. With the aid of Citoyenne Pelven a great roll of red drugget had been hired to cover the uneven boards and also to deaden sound if such were possible, but, as a matter of fact, sound was *almost* impossible, for the great front attic ran over a part of la Chapelle which was now seldom or never used—the girls, whatever their nationality; the teachers of the staff, the Head Mistress, and even the servants all reposing in quite a different wing of the house.

Still, the attic must be made worthy of the entrancing ceremony which was to take place on the following Tuesday, soon after midnight. Françoise found herself during these days most useful, for she was by nature a born decorator, and when she placed wreaths of artificial flowers, which she made with her own nimble fingers out of various pieces of coloured paper, and hung them in great wreaths—representing roses, violets, lilies, flowers of all sorts and kinds—from the old rafters, causing them to surround the narrow windows, and above all things, to form a background to the old-fashioned high chair which was to be the Queen's throne, the girls of the Committee began to consider that Muriel was right in admitting so useful a member into their midst.

Since her initiation Françoise Dupuis had been a changed character. She was lively and bright and

pleasant to everyone. The teachers much wondered what remarkable change had come over the hitherto disagreeable girl, but Françoise was obliged to hold her tongue, and only the initiated knew why she was happy and why her face was wreathed in smiles—so much so that her plainness was no longer greatly commented on in the School.

The Committee worked Françoise hard and sent her constantly to Tourelle on messages, which she carefully and deftly carried without any fuss or noise. As to Citoyenne Pelven, she was in the seventh heaven of delight, for the days of prosperity were indeed hers, and her nephew Henri and she had delightful confabs together night after night when Henri rested on his way to the post-office before he returned to his rather humble home in one of the smallest streets of the little town. But neither Henri nor Citoyenne Pelven knew what had happened. Wise as they were, they did not guess that the *cobra*—ah, the *cobra*—had become a member of the *Société*. They did know that that little *vipère,* Jeanne Gérusez, had gone over to Miss Hope Ashley; and they did not know that the more destructive snake, the cobra, had got into the very heart of the school, and was secretly and quietly biding her time. Neither did they know that pretty, pleasant little Edmée Leroux was no longer a member of the *Société.*

But behold! the day arrived. The preparations were on a vast scale. The twelve girls put on their white dresses and waited for the signal to enter the

great front attic. On this occasion Joyce was awake. She had not, indeed, undressed. She wore, by request, her beautiful tea gown of crimson silk, and when Juliette on this occasion called for her, she was ready to accompany her.

The place was brilliant with light; the Committee wore their most becoming tea gowns. Muriel looked charming in pale blue; the Comtesse in white. The other members of the *Société* clustered eagerly round. There were double the number of sconces that there were on the previous occasion, and the long table, with its white cloth and crimson centrepiece, groaned with dainties.

Citoyenne Pelven had given herself up heart and soul to the making of the good things for this fête—this fête which was to be a fête indeed; the largest and greatest ever yet subscribed to by the members of the Society.

Clever Françoise had managed not only to make the beautiful artificial flowers, but had decked them with innumerable coloured beads, which gave them the appearance of flowers with the dew on them. In short, the whole effect of the long room was decidedly picturesque.

When Juliette led Joyce forward, the entire assembly of the Society fell on their knees, extended their hands in token of delight and worship, and then the Comtesse de Mori came forward and took Joyce's little hand.

"You will belong—you *will* belong," she said,

speaking in her sweet and exquisite French. There was something in the scene—something in the look of sincere welcome in the Comtesse's eyes; something in the imploring, beseeching faces of the other girls; something, perhaps, in the fairy-like beauty of the room—which carried Joyce, metaphorically, off her feet.

"Do you really wish me to be your Queen?" she exclaimed.

Immediately the air became full of voices—soft, sweet, entreating voices.

"*Yes—yes—oui, oui—certainement, certainement,*" rang like music through the room.

"Then I accept," said Joyce. "I will do—I will do my *very* best; but in my own way, remember, remember; in my own way."

"In your own way, most beloved Queen," said Muriel in a tone of rapture.

"Enthrone our Queen, enthrone her! Crown our Queen, crown her!" called voices from the further end of the room.

Joyce was led by the hands of Muriel and the Comtesse to the foot of the chair which was called the throne. There were three steps up to the seat. Before she mounted these steps Muriel flung the ermine cape over her shoulders, and the Countess placed the crown of bay on her head. Immediately afterwards, and before she could utter a word, the twelve maidens in white, who formed the choir, came forward, surrounded the throne, and began that low,



"Enthrone our Queen, enthrone her!"—*Page* 210.

sweet singing which had so captivated Joyce on a similar occasion three weeks ago.

Their words were different now, but even more poignantly arresting, more exquisitely sweet.

Gracious Queen, ascend your throne;
Lovely Queen, accept your own—
All of love that we can give,
All of sunshine while you live.

May your path be always bright,
May you ever choose the right;
From fear do we defend you.
Love divine descend upon you!

To you, beloved, do we cry;
With you—with you we try—
Oh, lead us in the right ways,
Oh, keep us in the dark days!

Teach to us the old story,
The one that leads to glory.
Ah, Queen, dear Queen, we adore you;
Give us of your love, we implore you!

With you we would be faithful and true;
With you—yes, ever following you!
Queen, oh, Queen! we adore you;
Give us of your love, we implore you!

CHAPTER XVI.

QUEEN ABSOLUTE.

So far as this story has run, one would suppose that nothing whatever was thought of at La Chapelle but the *Société de Joie.* This, however, was anything but the case. It was Madame la Comtesse de Trés' motto that girls should work hard while they worked, and play happily with their whole hearts when they played. Although she knew nothing whatever of the *Société de Joie,* she was well aware that various secret societies, secret meetings, even secret refreshments, went on at the School. Of none of these did she take the least notice, looking back, like the wise woman she was, to her own early days at School; to her own endeavours to get the greatest fun out of this period which ought to be the happiest part of a girl's existence. In consequence there never was a more popular Head Mistress—A Head Mistress who was wise enough to shut her eyes when it was well for her to do so; to take no notice of what went on, so to speak, under her very nose. But even Madame la Comtesse de Trés knew nothing whatsoever of the *Société de Joie.* She knew noth-

ing about the celebrated midnight meetings, nothing of what went on in the great front attic. She truly and verily believed that the front attic in question was infested by rats, and she was not ashamed to confess that she was afraid of rats. It is true on one occasion she put a couple of cats into the said attic, but the cats came out after a couple of days, sleek, well nourished, and without, to all appearance, having exterminated a single rat. Madame, therefore, being very busy about other matters, let the rats remain. As long as they did not invade the lower premises—the rooms where the girls slept, the teachers slept, and where she herself slept—it did not greatly matter. As to that other story which related to the late Mother Superior, it had of course reached her ears; but she was far too wise a woman to take the least notice of it, or, in fact, to believe it. On one occasion a servant belonging to the establishment spoke of having certainly *seen* the great Mother Superior in the complete dress of her Order. She had seen her with her own eyes, so declared the maid, gliding down the stairs from the front attic. And she—the maid in question—had been taken with a strange trembling and an awful, most awful fear. She could hardly hold herself together, as she expressed it; her knees trembled under her; she almost swooned. Madame looked gravely at the timid girl, and said that as she felt these things so acutely it would perhaps be wiser for her to leave the establishment—did Louise wish to leave?

This was the very last thing Louise wished or intended.

"Then, listen," exclaimed Madame. "The next time, the very next time either you or your fellow servants bring such stories to me—stories as absurd as they are false—I give you a month's wages in full, and you leave, one and all of you, *that day. Comprenez-vous,* Louise?"

Louise certainly did comprehend, and the story of the Mother Superior was not heard again in the School, nor did any of the servants, well cared for and looked after by their bountiful and kind mistress, take their departure.

And now Joyce Selby was Queen; yes, unaccountable as it seemed to herself, she was head of the Society. Joyce had been given most fully to understand that when she became Queen, when she took the vows of secrecy which were all that were expected of her, she was also an absolute monarch—she could do what she willed and as she pleased. Joyce Selby had therefore very lofty ideas with regard to her mission. She began by making friends with all the girls who belonged to the *Société de Joie.* She got them to impart to her their secrets—their small cares, their little troubles. They were requested by Joyce, looking fully at them with her beautiful eyes as she spoke, to keep nothing back, and they did keep nothing back. They told Joyce everything with regard to their likes and their dislikes. For instance, there was a murmur amongst

the *Société*—a murmur, sure but firm, that they sorely, most sorely, missed pleasant, bright, good-humoured Edmée Leroux, and that they heartily detested Françoise Dupuis. At odd moments, during hurried times, they whispered of these things to their Queen. Their Queen was silent, but she was also sympathetic, and she looked very grave. She contrived, before she had been a month Queen of the Society, to put into the heads of the girls, those girls who did not exactly belong to the Committee, the stern and grave fact that there was something more in life than mere pleasure. The Society must of course have its fun and its laughter, its secret faiths, even its midnight revels, but it must also attend—oh, and Joyce looked very earnest as she said these words—it must also attend to those main things which brought them to the School. The girls must learn; the girls must please their teachers; the girls must aspire; they must, in short, grow up. Life was not meant only for fun; life was assuredly meant for work. The ideas of the new Queen were absolutely new to her subjects. They must belong to the *Société* but they must also work in the cause of the *Société* day by day and hour by hour. They must acquit themselves, as Joyce said, like *men*—they must be strong! Joyce was very great on the subject of strength. She said over and over again that the poorest creature on earth was a weak woman; but that, on the other hand, the noblest was a strong, determined, brave one. She would have all

her subjects strong, determined and brave. Her influence had a great effect, and lessons were never so well learnt in class rooms, and the teachers had never before been so pleased with those demoiselles who had hitherto been somewhat slack and feeble, who in the excitement of mirth had forgotten the other side of the old proverb that play without work makes Jack a dull boy—that, in short, work and play must go together if these beautiful demoiselles of France were to do anything by and by. The young Queen was very earnest when she spoke to her disciples, and her dark Spanish eyes had a way of flashing which impressed them most deeply. But Joyce by no means considered her mission at an end when she had impelled her young subjects to work because it was right to work. She wanted the *Société de Joie* not to be merely a joy to themselves, but a joy to others in the school. There came a certain day when Christmas was long, long past; and when the great festival of *Mi Carême* was close at hand. Most of the girls went home for *Mi Carême.* Those who could not had complete holidays. Françoise was to visit her father and her stepmother in Paris, and looked forward with great delight to this time of rejoicing. She had gotten over her hatred of *la belle mère* and anticipated a delightful time in Paris.

Mi Carême came on this occasion early in April, and it was on the day before Françoise was to leave the school for Paris that the Queen of the *Société de Joie* sent a request in cipher for the presence of

Muriel St. John, the Comtesse de Mori, and other members of the Committee. The girls felt some surprise at her request; but was she not their Queen? Had she not already paid ten pounds towards the needs of the *Société?* As Joyce gave the money she had said very quietly and simply:

"The great Lord Almighty has given me wealth. When first I came to the school, I wished to belong to the poor girls, here; this was my earnest wish—then one whom I must not name said to me that my intention was unworthy. She showed me the error of my ways; she explained that I ought to spend my money worthily."

The girls who listened did not quite understand what Joyce meant; but on the occasion when she requested the assembling of the Committee she explained herself more fully.

She stood before her young friends and spoke with great earnestness.

"*Do* we spend our money worthily?" she asked. "We use a great deal of money—on what? On sweetmeats, chocolates, *sirops*—ah! but is it wise, is it necessary?"

Muriel felt her own pretty eyes flash fire. The Comtesse and some other girls who were near were quite silent. After a minute's pause Muriel said:

"You do not look far enough ahead, Queen. The chocolates, cakes and tartlets that you despise form the livelihood of one of the best-natured women in Tourelle."

Joyce found herself blushing.

"I did not know," she said, in her sweet, low voice. "I beg of you to forgive me for my want of understanding. Now I just simply want to add that when money is wanted for any *rightful* purpose it is but for our Committee to demand, and for me, your Queen, to accede to your request."

This very earnest speech of Joyce's was made, as was said, the day *before* the visit of Françoise Dupuis to Paris to see her father and her stepmother. The Queen's words were repeated to Françoise by Muriel, and Françoise looked excited, more than excited. She looked like one who was making up her mind to a strong and extraordinary step.

"What are you thinking of, little Françoise?" enquired Muriel.

"Ah, but *chèrie,*" replied Françoise, "my thoughts surely are my own. I have been very happy indeed since you've admitted me to your Society."

"I will tell you something, Françoise," replied Muriel. "I mean at one of our next meetings—our next finance meeting, I mean—to propose that *you* come on the Committee. Then you will have a real finger in the pie."

"Ah, but is that possible?" cried Françoise, her eyes filling with delight.

"Leave it to me," said Muriel. "But as a reward for this great indulgence, which is seldom or never granted so soon, will you whisper to me,

Françoise, what you really, from the bottom of your heart, think of our Queen, Joyce Selby?"

"Do you want me to tell you the exact truth?" enquired Françoise.

"*Certainement.* What but the truth would be of any value?"

"Well, then, I will speak, trusting to your honour, Muriel, to keep my words a secret. I—I like *not* your Queen."

"*Our* Queen, naughty," interrupted Muriel, patting her friend lightly on her thin arm. "*Our* Queen, remember; yours as much as mine."

"Yes, yes," replied Françoise, "but it was you and the Comtesse who had her enthroned. It was you and the Comtesse who managed the whole affair."

"It was wise and necessary," replied Muriel, "and I do not go into particulars with you, little Françoise."

"Oh, I grant the necessity," replied Françoise, shrugging her spare shoulders in truly French fashion. "But what I say is this: I comprehend more than you think I comprehend. I know more than you think I know. I admit, no one admits more fully, that the Queen is rich—ah! what will not money achieve; that the Queen is of noble birth. Have I not seen with my own eyes a water-colour sketch of her place in Warwickshire which hangs in Miss Tabor's sitting-room? It is called 'Coning's Towers,' or 'Coning's Towers Castle,' or some such

name. She is also very, very beautiful. She has a strong and taking way with her, and she is clever, very clever; nevertheless—"

There was a dead silence. Françoise looked full at Muriel; Muriel looked fully back at Françoise.

"What does *nevertheless* mean, little maiden from Paris?" she remarked, after the pause of silence had become irksome.

"It means this," said Françoise. "Joyce Selby has many gifts, but she is not suited to be the Queen of *Joy* and *Beauty*. She aims at the stars, and we do not want the stars."

"I should think not," replied Muriel, with an impatient shrug.

"You will see," continued Françoise in a tone of strong excitement, "you will perceive that I am right. The Queen is great, but she is not *our* Queen. Already she is working mischief in our midst; already she is undermining our time-honoured institutions. Tell me one thing, Muriel, beloved. Must the Queen, elected Queen by the whole Society, remain our Queen for a whole year?"

"*Mais, certainement,*" said Muriel, "unless indeed she does—what Joyce could not do—that is, something mean, low and underbred; something deceitful. In fact, even to think of such a thing in connection with Joyce is impossible—she is our Queen for a year, and you must bear it, Françoise, and learn to respect one who is so worthy of respect."

"*Mais oui, mais oui,*" said Françoise. She rose as she spoke; there was an ugly expression on her face.

That afternoon the Committee met in full. The whole Committee were present, including, of course, the usual members, namely—Muriel and the Comtesse, Marguerite de Marni, Juliette de Tournay, the Signorina Gemma Ravella, and the Signorina Imelda Olivetta. There were others besides, and seated quietly on her high throne was the Queen. She was always present on these occasions, but she did not, as a rule, take part in them. The business of the Committee was not her business. The usual matters were attended to swiftly and deftly, and the girls were looking longingly out of the windows of the great attic, anxious to get out and enjoy themselves—these Committee meetings were always dull, so they thought. But as they were about to rise, in order to leave the attic, Muriel St. John stood up and arrested their wandering attention.

"You have sent for us, Queen," she began—"I do not quite know why—but *I* have a proposal to make to the Committee. The number of our Committee is one short since Edmée Leroux left us. It is a pity to be short in numbers, for casting votes on different important questions are from time to time required, and one less member on our Committee may, and undoubtedly *will,* often turn the scale. I propose, therefore, that as Edmée left us for no adequate reason, but for the singularly *in*adequate rea-

son that we wished to make Françoise Dupuis a member of the Society, I propose, therefore, mesdemoiselles, that, as we have found during the last few months—and indeed ever since she joined us—the services of Françoise most useful to the Society, I propose that we make *her* a member of the Committee. I know it is a little soon, but Françoise is a clever and remarkable girl. Think how tremendously she helped us during the week before our Queen was enthroned." Here all the girls turned and bowed to Joyce. "I propose, therefore, that we make her a member, for I consider that she is worthy. She will help us, and we want help."

Astonished looks pervaded the faces of most of the Committee, but no one, not even the Comtesse, spoke. Suddenly, however, Joyce Selby rose from her throne, came down the three steps, and stood before the girls.

"It is true, is it not," she said, "that I, as your Queen, have the casting vote?"

"*Certainement, mais certainement,* beloved Queen," cried Juliette de Tournay, while several other voices echoed her words.

"That being the case," said Joyce, speaking very quietly and with the dignity which it was impossible to surpass, "I do not *wish* Françoise Dupuis to come on the Committee. I am sorry to go against you, Muriel, but my resolve is firmly fixed."

Muriel felt her colour changing from white to red. She felt an angry leap of hatred rising up in her

heart. But the other girls, including the Comtesse, clapped hands vehemently and applauded.

"You are right, Queen, you are right," they said.

Joyce sat down again quite quietly, and a minute or two later the Committee dispersed; the old-fashioned chair which served as throne was pushed into the deep cupboard which also contained the dress of the Mother Superior. Muriel seized the key, and the girls dispersed over the grounds.

It goes without saying, that Muriel repeated the words of Joyce Selby to Françoise Dupuis, and that Françoise, in consequence, went up to Paris with a very ugly feeling against the Queen deep in her heart. It was quite true that she had never liked her. How could darkness associate with light? How could meanness associate with nobility? But Françoise was clever, and she had plenty of time to think. She was now resolved as firmly as girl could be to get Joyce deposed, to get her to lay down her sceptre and put aside her crown. In short, Joyce was to be publicly disgraced in the eyes of all the members of the *Société*. How this was to be accomplished Françoise had not yet discovered; but she trusted much to her wits to aid her. Had her wits ever failed her yet? When, however, Muriel told her what Joyce had said, she made no audible remark of any sort. There were times when she felt wise enough to know that silence was best. It was during *Mi Carême*, when the School kept universal holiday, and when Françoise was still in Paris, that the Queen sent a

cipher to the different members of the Committee, asking them to meet her at five o'clock in the old attic. It was now quite light at five o'clock, and there was no need of any artificial light. The girls assembled, all more or less excited, all more or less pleased to meet their Queen, whom they dearly loved. Yes, everyone in the School loved Joyce with the exception of Muriel and Françoise. Joyce appeared on this occasion with a fresh young dignity about her which was at once very charming, and very arresting. She stepped lightly on to her throne and, bending forward, addressed the different girls who flocked round her.

"I have now been your Queen," she said, "for over five months. I have, during that time, got to know you—some of you very well indeed, some of you but a little. Be that as it may, however, I *do* know you, and I will say from the bottom of my heart, that I—I love you."

There came a little murmur of enthusiastic applause.

"I have, therefore," continued Joyce, speaking in her extremely pretty French, "a proposal to make to you, *chères demoiselles.* We have, during the past, done what we could for the happiness and well-being of ourselves. I propose now that we do something—something big and great, for the happiness of—of others. The very name of our Society—the *Société de Joie*—ought surely not only to mean the well-being of ourselves and those who belong to us. In

my opinion, *chères demoiselles,* it ought to mean far more, something far greater. It ought to be a Society—secretive, if you like, although I see no cause for the secrecy; but with that I do not interfere; nevertheless it ought to be a Society to promote the happiness of the entire School of La Chapelle. It ought even to extend to our mistresses; to our beloved Head Mistress, La Comtesse de Trés. It ought to be a sort of beam of sunshine running through the entire School, pervading it at all times and in all places. We ought not to consider our own joy at all; but we ought, with our eyes steadfast, pure, raised high to the great Almighty God, to make this Society a secret blessing to the School. I propose, therefore, *chères demoiselles,* that we do this: I propose that we commence our next programme by inviting every member of the School, including the staff of teachers and our beloved head mistress, to a *soirée* which we will prepare for them under the trees towards evening in the merry month of June. It is now early in April. The *soirée* will be given by the members of the *Société de Joie,* only the name of our Society must, of course, be suppressed. I, personally, am willing to bear the expense of this *soirée,* to get Citoyenne Pelven to make her very best cakes and tartlets and *sirops* for the occasion. I mean also to plan out such a programme as was never seen or even thought of before in the body of this great School. I want every member of the Society, with the exception of myself, and Muriel St. John, and

the Comtesse de Mori, and four other girls whose names I will mention presently, to appear as fairies, with fairy lights on their heads. I mean these fairies to flit over the grass and the lawns, and I intend to invite Madame, our beloved Madame, to share in our festival. The introduction of the fairies will be followed by a great dance, held on the lawn, in which *all* will, I hope, presently join; and I further propose that our choir should sing a special song which I will help them to compose for the occasion, in which not I, who am, after all, but slight and unworthy, but Madame la Comtesse de Trés, Fräulein Schwann, Miss Tabor, Mlle. Armor, and other teachers in the School shall be assured of our undying love and respect. Think you not it is a good idea, *chères demoiselles?*"

"It is an excellent idea," said the Comtesse.

"It is beautiful, and just like you, Queen," cried Juliette.

"Yes, it is a good idea," said Muriel, but her voice was less enthusiastic than those of the others.

"Then we will carry it—we will consider that it shall take place," cried the Queen. "Understand that *all* expense falls upon me. We will erect a marquee in the grounds, and tents will also be required. The question of money need not be considered. But now, I've something more to say. The summer will soon be upon us. We have hitherto enjoyed ourselves for our *own* sakes. Now for the first time we propose that on the 21st of June, the

longest day, we stretch out our sympathies and touch others, revealing nothing, but yet giving joy—great joy and pleasure to others. But we must not stop there, *mesdemoiselles;* there are, I happen to know, in the crowded and hot town of Tourelle, hungry little boys and girls. I have heard of them through Henri and through Citoyenne Pelven—little boys and girls who would delight in what we think little or nothing of. I propose, therefore, that our *next* fête, with the consent, of course, of the Comtesse, should be given to the poor and hungry children of Tourelle. Thus we still further widen our sympathies. The *Société de Joie* will do a great and a noble work."

There was a dead silence after Joyce's last remarks. Then Muriel said in a discontented tone:

"You forget, Queen, that by entertaining these little, dirty beggars, you altogether break through the main object of the *Société de Joie.*"

"And what is the main object?" asked Joyce, looking at Muriel with her steady, bright eyes.

"Why, the name tells you that," exclaimed Muriel. "It is to give ourselves joy."

"Ah!" exclaimed Joyce, "and have you never thought, Muriel St. John, that by promoting the joy of others you give to yourself—yes to yourself, joy the most exquisite? 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' That quaint text holds good to the present day. But remember," she added, and she drew herself up to her full and stately height, "I *hold* you

to your promises. I am your *Queen,* and you are under a vow to obey me. I ask for these two fêtes, one for all the members of the School, the other for the little, poor and hungry children of Tourelle, and I insist—yes, I *insist* upon being obeyed."

There was a very faint addition of colour in the young Queen's cheeks. A momentary quiet arrested the speech of every girl belonging to the Committee. Then there came a clamour of voices, of enthusiasm so high, so great, that it could not for a single moment be repressed.

"Queen, Queen, we adore you;
Give us of your love, we implore you."

CHAPTER XVII.

LA COBRA'S LETTER.

On that same evening, Muriel St. John and La Comtesse Caterina were pacing slowly up and down a walk which was called the "Beech Walk," and which formed part of the grounds of La Chapelle. The Comtesse was unusually silent. Muriel looked at her two or three times, and with each glance there was a growing impatience in her face. At last, unable to bear herself any longer, she spoke.

"Well," she said, "well, Caterina?"

"Yes, Muriel," replied Caterina, turning her grave eyes and fixing them on the other girl's face.

"You are," said Muriel, "you are for *her,* of course?"

"Can you doubt it?" replied Caterina. "She is very noble. We have never had a Queen like her before. She has opened our eyes."

"Unpleasantly," remarked Muriel.

"No, not unpleasantly," answered Caterina. "I think we ought to be very thankful. Reflect for yourself, Muriel, what silly, selfish demoiselles we were in the past. We thought only of ourselves and

our own—our own pleasure. She has opened our eyes; may Heaven bless her."

"I don't want my eyes to be opened," said Muriel.

Caterina very slightly squeezed the arm of her friend and companion.

"The process is often a little painful, dear Muriel," she said, "but it is good for us, yes, very good for us. We have lived for ourselves, absolutely and entirely for our own selfish selves. She has shown us the truth. No one could show it more gently, more quietly, with greater dignity. I for one say, 'God bless our Queen'; and I think, Muriel, most of the girls who belong to the Committee will agree with me."

"Most, but *not* all," replied Muriel, a kind of choke rising into her throat. "There is, for instance, myself. I totally and completely disagree with her. There are others who belong to the Committee who I know join me in my feelings. You and I *were* the heads of the Committee, Caterina; do you really and truly intend to desert me now?"

"I absolutely and fully intend to follow the Queen," said Caterina.

"*Mais,* Caterina, *chère amie,* do but listen. Was it fair of her, was it right of her, was it noble of her, to stand up against us all, against us who *know,* and forbid poor little Françoise Dupuis to become a member of the Committee. Granted, even granted that she was right to-day; was she right that other day, when she forbade in the face of the Committee

our admitting Françoise as a member? Do you think that was kind or generous?"

"There was no question of kindness or generosity," said Caterina. "Françoise was exceedingly unsuited to become a member of the Committee. To admit her would be to break one of our most stringent rules. Our laws, firm as the laws of the Medes and Persians, are that no girl should be elected as a member of the Committee who has not served her time for at least a year as a member of *la Société de Joie*. Françoise became a member of our Society not six months ago. The Queen was right to adhere to her prerogative. Why, Muriel, should an exception be made in her favour? What would many other girls belonging to the Society think if she, for *no* apparent reason, was put over their heads?"

"Only that I promised her," said Muriel in a low voice. "Is my promise to go for nothing?"

"You did wrong to make the promise, dear Muriel; and the Queen was absolutely right to see that your wish was not carried into execution. On that occasion she acted on her prerogative. It required some bravery, which she possesses; it required some courage, which is hers; it required strength, for you are not an easy person to oppose, Muriel St. John."

"Well, well, let that pass," exclaimed Muriel. "I see you are altogether for Joyce Selby. I am sorry now that we made her our Queen. I should have taken the advice of those wiser than myself, but I was pig-headed and silly, and now I suffer."

"There is no occasion for you to suffer, dear Muriel. We have secured, thank Heaven! a most lofty-minded and noble young Queen. I say nothing whatever now with regard to her wealth; I only speak of her character. She is without fear and without reproach; she wishes to lead us into loftier and higher ways. For my part I shall follow her; yes, to the bitter end."

"To the bitter end?" exclaimed Muriel in a strangled sort of voice. "Would you, for instance, give *me* up for her?"

"No, no, don't be so silly. Hitherto we have allowed our Queen absolute authority, which she has never executed. She has simply bowed to the decrees of the Committee. Now at last we have got a Queen who thinks for herself and acts for herself. We cannot possibly interfere with her, and we *will not*. She takes the lead, the Committee follow, the members follow. For the very first time, the *Société de Joie* has got a head worthy of it. I, for my part, am very proud of our Queen."

"Ah, well," exclaimed Muriel, "then I see what lies before us. You have considerable power, not only in the School but in the Society. Our dear little Society will be turned by your means and by the means of Joyce Selby into a merely philanthropic institution. We shall feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Ah, bah! I hate that sort of thing! I did not come to School for that sort of thing."

Caterina made no response, and Muriel, giving her a second and very keen glance, presently left her side to seek out the companionship of a more congenial spirit. Françoise would be returning to School on the following morning, and Muriel hoped a good deal from Françoise and her wit. She knew that Françoise cordially hated Joyce Selby; she had but to rouse that hatred a little further, to add a little more fuel to that fire, and Françoise would do what Muriel had already expressed under her breath—the dirty work of the Society.

Meanwhile Caterina went slowly and thoughtfully, with that young dignity which belonged to her and to her race, to a certain portion of the grounds where Hope Ashley and Joyce Selby were walking together. She had no wish to interrupt the friends, and she knew perfectly well that Joyce would keep her vow of secrecy. But now to her astonishment and pleasure Joyce stopped in her walk, stretched back her hand, and by a subtle sort of invitation drew Caterina's own hand through her arm.

"Three are not *always* trumpery," she said in her low, sweet tones. "Caterina, I understand from Hope that at one time you and she were great, very great *friends*. Hope is the dearest, noblest girl I know. Why, Comtesse, have you given her up?"

Caterina felt her eyes fill with tears. Hope looked at her with her own peculiarly steady glance; then she also held out her hand, and the next moment Caterina found herself walking between Hope and

Joyce, rather silent, rather overcome, but filled with a wonderful new joy. For Hope, without a word, had let bygones be bygones; had addressed Caterina in the old tone; had spoken to her on the old sweet subjects; and Muriel, in the distance, watched the three as they paced up and down.

"Joyce—Joyce *is* unworthy," she said to herself. "I'll fathom her wickedness yet; I'll dethrone her yet. There is no doubt whatever that Joyce, Caterina and Hope are talking against *me;* Joyce and Caterina are revealing the secrets of our Society. Hope was asked to join; she would not join; now she is being told our gravest, most important secrets. Ah, well, it is easy to dethrone Joyce if this is proved; and Caterina can go, too—Caterina, whom I loved, and took from Hope. But such treachery on the part of Joyce cannot, *must* not be overlooked. How impatient I am for to-morrow! How I long for to-morrow to arrive, in order to pour my troubles into the ears of Françoise."

"Thou art very silent, *chèrie,*" exclaimed Juliette de Tournay. "What ails thee? Why dost thou not speak?"

"Hark! Look! Watch!" cried Muriel.

At that moment Jeanne Gérusez ran up to the group of three, said something to Hope, who smiled, nodded, and pressed her hand. Jeanne Gérusez set off running to a distant part of the grounds. Her face was alight with tender smiles; the whole expression of that little face had completely altered

since Hope had taken her up. She went in the direction of the plantation. A pinched-looking, ragged boy was standing at the other side. Jeanne gave him an eager message and pressed four sous into his little, dirty palm.

"Eat well and sleep well to-night," she said; "and understand that all is for the best." Jacques looked at the small coins as though they were gold. A smile lit up his pinched face; the next moment he had vanished from view.

It was impossible for Muriel—strain her eyes as she would—to observe what Jeanne Gérusez had done. But she had a suspicion which caused her heart to beat violently. Jeanne had run very fast in the direction of the old summerhouse, had even passed beyond it and was lost to view. Was it possible that Jeanne Gérusez had now become a friend of Citoyenne Pelven? Was it possible that the grave secrets of the great Society were becoming known, not only in the School, but beyond the School? Surely for what other purpose had Jeanne rushed beyond the summerhouse, at the back of which Citoyenne Pelven was apt to stand?

"What is the matter with you, Muriel?" repeated Juliette.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," said Muriel, in a vexed tone. "Why should people suppose when I'm a little silent that there is something the matter with me. I say *non,* I say *non,* a thousand times. But, as we are together, I should just like to ask you, Juliette,

what you thought of our Queen's conduct and our Queen's suggestion this afternoon?"

"Ah, but they were truly *magnifique,*" exclaimed Juliette. "Did she not open our eyes and scorch us a little bit, and then—then—show us the *right* way? Ah, but she was superb, was our gracious Queen! I would follow her—I would follow her to the death."

"Ah," said Muriel, speaking very slowly, "her idea was certainly very good. I wonder how she will carry it out, Juliette, and also keep our Society a profound secret. For a profound secret it must be kept if she is to continue to be our Queen."

"If she is to continue?" cried Juliette, raising her soft, black eyes with a look of horror. "What can you mean, Muriel by 'if'? Do you indeed think that one like Joyce would break her vow? Leave it to her to manage and, believe me, all will be well."

"You think so?" said Muriel, in a tone of sarcasm.

"Think so?" replied the enthusiastic French girl. "Do I not know it? There never was a queen of our *Société* loved like her. We will all—all—follow her wherever she asks us to go."

"You think so?" said Muriel. "Well, I've a headache, and am going in. I will leave you, Juliette, to your pleasant reflections."

Muriel strolled towards the house, which she entered.

The next day, at a comparatively early hour, Françoise Dupuis returned. As soon as possible Muriel took her into her confidence, and related with fervour and a vast amount of exaggeration what had taken place at the last meeting of the Committee. The Queen's plans, the Queen's fixed determination, were largely commented on, and were related in such a manner that the Queen appeared to the watching eyes and listening ears of Françoise Dupuis to be a monster in human flesh.

"Ah, you poor Muriel!" exclaimed Françoise.

"I feel very shaken and upset," said Muriel.

"You want my help, *n'est-ce pas?*" exclaimed Françoise.

"Ah," replied Muriel, "but you can do nothing."

"Leave the matter in my hands, and do not ask a single word," exclaimed Françoise.

"But Françoise, dear Françoise, you must be very careful. The Queen *has* the right to rule us; the Queen *has* the right to command; and we, by our own rules, are forced to obey. This is the very first Queen who has ever attempted to go against the Committee; but this Queen has done so, and the dreadful, dreadful thing is this, Françoise—that without any exception, unless I mention my poor, little, humble self, there is not a demoiselle belonging to the *Société de Joie* who would not go to the world's end for Queen Joyce Selby, so great is her influence over them, so completely has she turned their heads."

Françoise was quite silent for a moment. Muriel watched her eagerly. She had felt sore enough when the news had been brought to her by the artful Muriel that she, Françoise, was not to come on the Committee because, forsooth, the Queen did not wish it. But now—but now—the weapons of revenge seemed to be placed in her hands.

"I will think; I will think hard," she said, after a pause. "Believe me, I like not your Queen. To me she is of all people the most intolerable. I have spoken about her to my stepmother, of course without revealing any secrets. And my stepmother—ah, but I like my stepmother; I was a silly girl to weep and wail when my father married again. He did right, and I have now a friend at home whom I never had before—she would, if necessary, *help* me in a case so important as this. We of the *Société de Joie* must dethrone the Queen. Leave it to me, I beseech of you, *chère* Muriel. I will tell you more with regard to my plans to-morrow, when I have thought them out a little."

Muriel felt slightly annoyed. There was a certain something with regard to Françoise which pleased and at the same time frightened Muriel. She was not, as she expressed it to herself, in her own set. Her own set belonged to such girls as Juliette de Tournay, Marguerite de Marni, Comtesse Caterina, Hope Ashley, Joyce Selby. What set did the daughter of the French *avocat* call her own? Muriel felt

a degree of fear as the girl slowly left her and walked into the house.

"She has a wicked face," thought Muriel. "Why have I put myself in her power? Well, well, it is too late now, and she may help me in the dethroning of the Queen. But I must be very, *very* careful. I must not give myself away. If blame falls, the blame must fall on her, not on me. MY *Société de Joie*—my delightful, refreshing, pleasant *Société!* Must one strange English girl upset everything, and must a common little French plebeian seek to ruin her, and perhaps me also, into the bargain? But I care not—I care not. Queen Joyce shall *not* have her way."

During the rest of that evening, Françoise Dupuis made herself as agreeable as she could to the different girls of the School. She had in a great measure lost her shyness. Her stepmother had completely dressed her in clothes which suited her. She was at once *piquante,* although ugly; at once arresting, although disagreeable. She had also the gift of telling a story in a very racy way. Paris was a fruitful theme of conversation, and Françoise, having spent *Mi Carême* in Paris, was able to give vivid and alas! false accounts of her lovely time; of her father's magnificent new house; of her charming *belle mère;* and of all the different people, both men and women, whom she had met. She told her stories with much verve and gusto, and the girls hung on her words and wondered why they had ever dis-

liked her. Amongst those girls who listened and watched and commented were several members of the *Société de Joie,* as well as two or three of the Committee. Françoise's small, light blue eyes, so closely placed together, revealing the poverty of her soul if not of her mind, were suddenly arrested by the keen, direct glance of Juliette de Tournay. Also of that beautiful Italian girl, Signorina Imelda Olivetta. By and by the girls dispersed to their different tasks, for School was now in full work; but, when this happened, Juliette de Tournay and Signorina Imelda Olivetta remained behind. Juliette said in a voice full of enthusiasm:

"Françoise, our Queen is *magnifique;* and she promises great—ah, great things in the future."

"We all love our Queen, we adore her," said the Signorina, and then the two girls left Françoise, who watched them with a scowl between her brows.

That night she thought a good deal, and before she went to bed wrote a long letter to her stepmother. In that letter she hinted to *la belle mère* that there might possibly be trouble in the School; and that, if such were the case, she, Françoise, *might* require her aid. The letter was given as usual to Henri, who, as usual, took it to his good aunt, Citoyenne Pelven, to glance at before it was posted. Citoyenne Pelven gazed along at the scrawling writing, at the untidy caligraphy. Then she raised her black eyes and fixed them on her nephew.

"Little son," she said—for this was her invari-

able name for him—"here is another letter from *la cobra;* but it goes not on this occasion to Lyon. Nevertheless the letters of *Mlle. la Cobra* had best *not* be circulated; for it is, little son, as though we spread in our midst a poison—the poison that surely causes *la mort.* Shall we consume the letter in the stove?"

"Ah, *oui, oui,* little mother," cried Henri; and this letter was also put into the white stove, while Citoyenne Pelven gave a harsh dry cackle.

"Haste with the rest of the letters to the post-office, little son," she remarked; "and come back for a cup of *bouillon* of the best, and *gâteaux* quite new. *Vite, vite,* little son, lose not the post for the other letters."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GIRL WHO WOULD BE QUEEN.

Muriel could scarcely sleep that night. She felt restless and unhappy. She ardently wished now that she had not arranged that close proximity of Joyce Selby's little room to her own. As the days went on she felt more and more that between her and Joyce was a gulf fixed—a gulf wide, deep, impassable. She had begun by loving Joyce for her beauty and for her wealth. But for Muriel's own strong desires Joyce would never have been asked to be Queen of *La Société de Joie;* but now she was Queen—Queen because Muriel had wished it; Queen because, having once seen her, the rest of the girls desired it. And, strange, incomprehensible as it may seem, Joyce Selby, the rich and beautiful young English heiress, had become a thorn in Muriel's side. All the other girls took her part—all the other girls except Françoise. And what *was* Françoise after all? She was not noble, either by birth or by character. She was nothing more nor less than a daughter of the people. She could stoop—ah, yes, she could stoop very low. Muriel felt that she wanted her to stoop, and yet at the same time she dreaded

inexpressibly what Françoise might do. Françoise was only a member of the Society, and yet, in Muriel's opinion at the present moment, she was the most important person therein. She could do untold mischief. She could—ah, yes, she *must* do untold mischief; there was no other way; there was no help for it. There was no possible way out but through that spirit of mischief, worldliness, even of wickedness, which lurked in the eyes of Françoise Dupuis. Had not Muriel on the previous evening at *diner* noticed the look of contentment and happiness on Hope's face? Had she not observed how La Comtesse Caterina talked to Hope quite in the old way—with the old affection, with the old light in her beautiful eyes? Did she not further observe how that horrible little girl, Jeanne Gérusez, darted backwards and forwards with many messages and whisperings, to all of which Hope listened with that grave attention which was one of her marked characteristics. How horrible it all looked! How more than suspicious it all seemed! What a faithless girl Joyce must be, after all, to dare not only to upset the plans of the Committee but to break her vows and tell them to Hope Ashley, who, in her turn, spoke of them to one so common as Jeanne Gérusez! Oh, the whole thing was impossible! Françoise *must* help Muriel, must help her quickly, or the beautiful Society would crumble to the ground. It would become as ashes under their feet. Oh, yes, oh, yes, there was no doubt whatsoever that the time had

come for Muriel to act. She felt already, as she tossed from side to side of her pillow, that she had lost her dearest friend, La Comtesse de Mori. Well, well, all yet might be correct, be proper, be as it used to be, if the Queen, the Queen, Joyce Selby, could be dethroned. Of course Muriel herself could not do this, but there was another who could. She could bring false accusations against Joyce, but *were* they false? To break the rule of secrecy was a crime of the blackest magnitude, and Muriel felt almost certain that Joyce had deliberately broken this primary rule. If such a thing could be proved against her, all else would be easy. The girls who now loved her would hate her; she would be sent from their midst with all the cruel malignancy which had followed the fate of Pauline. Let her English castle go; let her wealth depart. They could do without her; she was too much for them. They did not after all want a Queen like her. They wanted a Queen as a figurehead—a Queen who would put her hand into her pocket when necessary and produce gold—unlimited gold. But, although Joyce could and would give of her money, she would never, under any circumstances, become a figurehead. Ah, well, she must be dethroned. The ceremony would be unpleasant, but Françoise would denounce the plot, and, after all, there would be truth in it. The turning round of the Comtesse, the curious messages conveyed to Jeanne Gérusez, would all be strong proof against Joyce. Joyce, Hope, Jeanne—ah, yes, yes,

there would be abundant proof for Muriel's purpose and for Françoise's purpose, although, of course, at the present moment Muriel had no intention of appearing personally in the matter. She would keep in the background; she would appear very, *very* sorry; she would even weep a little when La Comtesse de Mori spoke to her. La Comtesse would come back again to her own Muriel. Joyce would undergo her punishment, severe, stately, undying, crushing, and would of course, as Pauline had done, eventually leave the great School of *La Chapelle*. Things would be as they had always been, and this little episode of the arrival of the Queen, of the departure of the Queen, would be quickly forgotten in the School. Muriel arranged it all that night as she lay awake. They would induce Marguerite de Marni to become their Queen; she had not yet received that honour. Marguerite was timid, and would not attempt to go against the dictates of the Committee. Yes, Marguerite was the girl for their purpose. Muriel had a longing desire to make Françoise their Queen, but that she knew would be absolutely impossible. She turned, therefore, from the tempting thought and, as the morning broke, dropped asleep.

It had been arranged between Muriel and Françoise that their next meeting was to take place at recess on the following day. They would go to the old rose garden, seat themselves in the bower and talk—ah, how easily, how busily they would talk! That old rose garden had listened before now to

many grave secrets; those ancient rose trees might well have bent their tall stems under the weight of the grave revelations made to them by the nuns; afterwards by the staff of Madame la Comtesse de Trés; and afterwards again by the young pupils of the said Comtesse. But on this occasion only two girls met in the rose garden, which was bare and destitute of all flowers. The last traces of winter had long fled. The old-fashioned spring flowers had begun to show bloom; there was a delightful tone of green—young, fresh, spring green—perceptible all over the ancient place. Muriel scarcely noticed this, so absorbed and distracted was her mind; but Françoise did, for with all her wickedness she loved nature.

"The Spring is coming," she said; "it will soon be here. Behold the buds—they are swollen to bursting. The little flowers will peep forth. The leaves will cover the old rose bushes; the roses themselves will blossom. Ah, but I love the Spring!"

"Do not talk of it now, Françoise," said Muriel. "The Spring is all very well, but we have something else to discuss. Have you thought of a means of deposing that traitor, Joyce Selby?"

"Speak not so loudly, *chèrie,*" replied Françoise. "Knowest thou not that walls have ears, and that eyes may look at us even from the midst of the thick ivy? Speak low, *chèrie,* if thou dost not wish to get into trouble—oh, of the most terrible."

"Of course I don't want to get into any trouble,"

said Muriel. "I don't want to have anything to do in the matter. In fact I must not have anything to do with it. It must rest in thy hands, *chère* Françoise."

"Ah, oh, is that indeed the case?" answered Françoise. "And how canst thou possibly tell that I will take this dirty work on myself?"

"I think you will because I ask you," said Muriel. "But for me you would never have become a member of our Society. Until I took your part you were miserable, *n'est-ce pas,* mademoiselle?"

"*C'est vrai,*" replied Françoise, "thou didst so much for me, little Muriel. But I remember and forget not—I paid for my advantages, such as they are. I gave into your green velvet purse five golden napoléons which I could ill spare. I have been—ah, it is true—happier, far happier, since I have become part of your *Société de Joie,* but I never counted upon doing the work which *you* would not stoop to. With you I can do much; without you *rien, oui, rien.*"

Muriel turned and looked gravely at Françoise, whose decidedly ugly face looked at its worst at that moment. Again that queer, subtle sort of fear, with regard to her new friend, crept over the heart of Muriel St. John. She paused for a full moment to think, then, slipping her hand inside Françoise's arm, she said in a coaxing tone:

"Seest thou not, little Françoise, that I, as a member of the Committee, as treasurer for the Com-

mittee, cannot possibly take a step which for thee, *chérie,* would be as nothing, and less than nothing. For, *chérie,* thou art not on the Committee; thou art simply a member of *La Société de Joie;* and I have news for thee. Ah, from the bottom of my heart I believe it. Our Queen not only takes the lead but I have every reason to believe that she is false to us; I've every reason to be certain that she has confided our secrets to Hope Ashley; that she has brought round la Comtesse Caterina; and that their little spy and go-between is no one less than that vipère in the grass, Jeanne Gérusez."

"Canst thou prove that, Muriel?" demanded Françoise, her light blue eyes sparkling with ill-concealed triumph.

"I cannot prove it," replied Muriel, "but I suspect it. I suspect it strongly—most strongly. I want it to be *thy* work to prove it, Françoise. *Comprenez-vous, chérie?*"

"*Ah, oui,*" replied Françoise, and then she was silent. After a minute or two she said:

"If this thing were proved—proved openly in the midst of all the members of the Society—the Queen would be dethroned."

"*Mais certainement,*" exclaimed Muriel, her eyes sparkling with delight.

"It would be *très difficile,*" exclaimed Françoise. "It would be almost *impossible.*"

"No, no, no," cried Muriel, "thou couldst accomplish the impossible."

"*Eh, bien,* let me consider—let me think," said Françoise.

Muriel eagerly watched her face. How small and common were those features; how furtive those tiny, blue eyes; how sloping away was that chin! What lines there were round the thin lips, which spoke at the present moment quite boldly and quite openly of a deceitful character! Suddenly Françoise turned round and faced Muriel.

"I know I am common and ugly," she said, "and I know I have no strength of character to boast of. Nevertheless I have a *certain* strength—a strength all my own which I will not speak of at the present moment. You want me, Muriel St. John, to do something very bad and very daring. I do not for a moment regret having become your friend. I have been much happier since I joined *La Société de Joie;* but I perfectly agree with you in not liking the Queen, Joyce Selby. But hearken, listen, Muriel! Although in very truth I hate the Queen, it is not for the reasons you hate her. I do not, for a single moment, think that one like Joyce Selby would break a vow or reveal to others what she faithfully promised not to reveal. The reason I hate Joyce Selby is because she is *too* good; ah, but listen—pray listen. I can get on with you because—because you are *not* good. There! *c'est vrai!* You belong to me and mine, and therefore we pull together. You call yourself one of the nobles of England, but I call you one of the ignobles of the earth, just as I am, chère

Muriel, one of the *ig*nobles of the earth. I am well acquainted with the fact that I am not good. Why, any child can see it in my face. Did not Edmée Leroux leave the Society when I was admitted a member? And Edmée is only the daughter of a vine-grower at Tourelle. But she is good, whereas I am not; she is very good, so she would not stay. But you stayed, Muriel, because we are as one. Now I will do what you wish, and so manage matters as to dethrone your Queen—your fine, gracious, noble Queen, in such a way and after such a manner that no one will connect you with the business. I will have a false accusation brought against her, and she will be forced to retire. I do not know how I will manage, and when I have arranged my plans I will not reveal them to *anyone.* But I do this on one condition, and one only. You, Muriel St. John, must make me—yes, *me—Queen in her stead;* otherwise I will have neither part nor lot in the matter."

Muriel fairly gasped, and yet she felt the subtle, strange power of Françoise filling her with its fatal poison.

"There is no great hurry," continued Françoise in her calm tones. "You are doubtless a little shocked, and you think the matter a little difficult; but believe me, long before the time arrives, it will not be difficult at all. It will be, in fact, the easiest thing in the world. I have thought this thing out. The present Queen, the lawful Queen, the Queen enthroned in the hearts of every member of the So-

ciety, has declared her intention of having a great fête in the grounds on the longest day, the 21st of June. She proposes to invite to that fête not only the members of the Society, but every girl in the School. She further intends to send invitations to the staff of teachers, and in especial to Madame la Comtesse de Trés. My advice to you, Muriel, is this: Let her have her way; you cannot possibly prevent it. She will so manage and arrange matters that not a soul will suspect that the invitation comes from the Queen of an important secret society. Ah, well, I repeat: let her have her way. As to her breaking her vows, such a thing is not in her, you silly Muriel. But I—I will step in on the conditions I have named, on the day—the night rather—of that great fête. Before that fête is over Joyce Selby shall be disgraced and dethroned, and I—*ah, oui, c'est grande, c'est magnifique!*—will ascend her throne, will wear her laurels, will be your Queen. Think not that I will interfere with the Committee, *except* by suggestion and whisper. Naughty thoughts will dart through the minds of the young demoiselles which I will put there without their knowing it. Naughty expeditions—wild and daring adventures—ah, yes, and you will help, you will help. For you and I, we belong to each other; we are, in short, affinities, *n'est-ce pas,* Muriel, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Oh, oh, *don't!*" cried Muriel; "I cannot listen to you at present; I cannot believe you at present.

You make me feel as I never, never felt before. Let me alone, Françoise, I can promise nothing now."

"Ah, but you will come to it," said Françoise. "It is a mere nothing, *pauvre* Muriel."

"There is the bell—we must return at once to our lessons," said Muriel in a tone of relief.

"I am glad," said Françoise. "I mean to work hard. We are great friends, are we not, Muriel?"

"*Peut-être,*" replied Muriel, but she said the words in a choking voice.

"On *no* other conditions do I help you but those that I have mentioned, Muriel," said Françoise.

She entered the great house with a sort of swagger. Muriel looked after her with downright horror in her eyes. Was it Françoise's new Parisian dress, or was it her face alone? Muriel felt terrified. She had, in short, put her hand into the fire, and the fire was scorching her.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HOSTESSES.

Joyce, having made her declaration to the *Société de Joie,* proceeded quite calmly to carry it out. Her first and immediate step was to consult with the Head Mistress, with the great Madame la Comtesse de Trés. She sent her, therefore, a little note begging for a private interview, and this lady, who took a great interest in her brilliant young pupil, arranged to receive her in her boudoir two or three days after the last meeting of the Society.

Miss Tabor had told Madame la Comtesse exactly what had passed between her and the English girl, and Madame was thoroughly pleased that Joyce should take her place in the School upon her own merits. Joyce had been an orphan from her earliest days, and was, until she became of age, under the care of certain guardians. By their directions Coning's Tower Castle was kept in absolute repair; its staff of servants was well supplied; and there was always present Joyce's faithful nurse, to welcome her darling whenever that child, as she expressed it, returned home after an absence, either at an English

School or from visits to her relations, who petted Joyce for herself, and did not trouble themselves to think of her wealth. As has been hinted in these pages, Joyce only thought of this said wealth as a valuable loan to be spent on others. It never occurred to her to use it, in any sense of the word, for her own aggrandisement or well-being. She consulted with her guardians as to the very best possible way in which to help her tenantry; and, as far as lay in their power, they did give her the necessary assistance, assuring her at the same time that when she reached twenty-one all the vast estates and the fine old house would be her own to do as she liked with. There were no better cottages, therefore, anywhere in Warwickshire than those which belonged to Coning's Tower; no cottages better drained, better whitewashed, with more substantial roofs, with nicer and prettier porches. The little gardens which appertained to each were abundantly filled with flowers of all sorts and kinds; and Joyce, young as she was, had already started a yearly competition for the best roses and the best geraniums—in short, the best flowers generally, that could be grown in that fine alluvial soil. The labourers on the estate adored their young mistress; the boys and girls hailed her approach with rapture. She was their idol—there was nothing they would not do for her. Joyce had a way of helping these people without talking of her wealth or position, and that way pleased them mightily.

Amongst the servants were the old housekeeper, Mrs. Ransom; the old butler, Peterson; and, above and beyond all these, Nanna, Joyce's faithful nurse. To these three she gave her warm heart, keeping up at the same time her young dignity, and letting them feel that, although she would do anything in the world for them, she expected their complete and absolute obedience. For two or three years of her young life Joyce had been educated at home by a lady who had herself been taught at the School of La Chapelle. Then this kind and good woman married, and Joyce was sent to a School in London. She had no fault to find with the School, but it was, in her opinion, commonplace, and she longed for the variety—in short, for the peculiar freshness, which she was certain belonged to La Chapelle. Her guardians were consulted with regard to the matter, and shortly after she had completed her sixteenth year she was sent to La Chapelle with the intention of remaining there for at least two years, in order to perfect herself in the French tongue. Joyce was slightly bewildered and slightly overcome by the new scenes in which she now found herself. Her first desire was to put aside her riches and take the place of *la pauvre demoiselle,* such as Jeanne Gérusez, such as Edmée Leroux. But Miss Tabor had effectually opened her eyes to the folly of this proceeding. Joyce very gravely and very sweetly accepted the dictum of her English governess; and from that moment took no pains to hide the fact that

she was rich. She also, after grave thought, accepted the great honour conferred on her, namely, the Queenship of *la Société de Joie,* and, having most carefully studied all the rules, she resolved to raise the Society to a pitch of greatness which it had never yet aspired to. She won the hearts of every girl belonging to the Society, with the two exceptions of Muriel and Françoise. Françoise she had not up to the present much noticed; and she was unaware when she wrote to Madame la Comtesse that Muriel disliked her. She was simply acting on her prerogative; she was the head of the Society; she was above the Committee. She wished such a thing to take place, and take place it must. Madame la Comtesse waited for the arrival of her young pupil with very great interest and some little wonder. She had not the faintest idea of the existence of the Society to which Joyce belonged; but Joyce felt that on the present occasion, while keeping all mention of the Society out of view, she could not proceed with her *grande fête* without the knowledge and assistance of Madame la Comtesse.

Now as she entered the Comtesse's room she dropped one of those pretty, graceful curtseys which she had inherited from her Spanish great-grandmother.

"You may remember, Madame la Comtesse," she began, "that when I first came to the School I wished to take upon me the appearance of poverty.

But Miss Tabor opened my eyes to the folly of such a proceeding."

"I am glad of it, my dear child," said the Comtesse. "In your case it would have been singularly unwise, and you could not have carried it through."

"*Ah, oui, Madame,* you are right."

"And now, my child," said the Comtesse, "what is it you want specially to talk to me about?"

"I am anxious, *chère Madame,*" said Joyce, speaking in that wonderfully winning voice of hers, and raising her dark, deep eyes to the face of the Comtesse, "to get your permission to hold a fête, yes, a fête, in these grounds on the twenty-first of June. I want to have full liberty from you, Madame, to carry out the details of the fête in my own way and with the aid of my special friends."

"And they?" enquired the Comtesse.

"They are in especial," replied Joyce, "Muriel St. John, La Comtesse Caterina, Juliette de Tournay, Marguerite de Marni, Hope Ashley, and several more."

"Ah, but *c'est bien, très bien,*" remarked the Comtesse, who did not know anything with regard to Muriel's special character. "You have chosen some of the nicest girls in the school for your friends, Joyce."

"I want to invite the entire School to the fête," said Joyce, "and all the teachers—all; and in especial you, chère Madame, you to be truly our Queen and Head on this great occasion."

"But this will cost money, *petite,*" remarked Madame, smiling into the glowing eyes, and looking at the dimples on the cheeks which were just touched with the sun of Spain.

"Madame, I have the money; I want to spend it on this great occasion. Will you give me permission, and will—will you join—will you come—will you be our head?"

"I will join, I will come, I will be your head, sweet child," said Madame, rising as she spoke, and pressing her lips on the soft, red lips of Joyce Selby.

Joyce went away from the presence of that dearly beloved Madame, with a feeling in her heart which partly choked her and partly raised her above the world. She did not, for the first time in her life, feel satisfied at keeping any secret from Madame; and yet, at the same time, she knew that the secret of *la Société de Joie* was not her own, but belonged to others. It could not, therefore, be revealed. She must soothe her troubled feelings with this thought, although a wild idea flashed through her brain that by and by in the future she might win the girls of the *Société* to her way of thinking, and might induce them to make Madame their Queen once and forever. But this belonged to the future. At present she was busy preparing for her fête.

It happened to be a particularly warm and fragrant Spring. The trees came into leaf, into bud, into flower; the cherry-blossoms so celebrated in *la belle France* covered the land with their sweet fra-

grance, their charming purity of colour. Then there appeared the other blossoming trees, such, for instance, as the apple; such, for instance, as the pear. The country all round Tourelle—poor, little, shabby, neglected Tourelle—and the country all round the great house of la Chapelle, looked somewhat as though it had put on bridal robes. There was a delicate, pearly pink to be seen as far as ever the eye could reach. Joyce was enraptured with this beauty. It is true that Françoise loved nature, but not as Joyce loved it. Joyce adored each flower, each bud, as though God Himself had touched the flowers and the buds and made them perfect. Joyce was by nature a very merry girl. Amongst all the girls in the School there was none with so hearty a laugh as hers; but beneath the laughter and the fun and a keen sense of revelry and rejoicing, there lay also an all-pervading sense of reverence. It was God Himself who had made this good, good world. It was by His divine orders that the sap rose year by year in the trees; and lo and behold! the trees blossomed and eventually brought forth fruit. It was all owing to God—yes, to God; and Joyce felt that she loved this Friend who was so close to her and yet so unseen.

At the present time she was very busy. There were constant meetings of the *Société,* constant and frequent desires on the part of Joyce to make their fête something wonderful—something which never before had been heard of or seen in the School of La

Chapelle. She was extremely careful at once to retain her own prerogative—that of Queen of the *Société*—and also to secure the combined action of certain very special friends. She said it was absolutely necessary on the evening of the fête to have hostesses; and she suggested that Muriel St. John and La Comtesse Caterina and herself should form three hostesses, that Juliette de Tournay should also join the group, and that finally, but most assuredly, her own friend, Hope Ashley, should be a hostess for this special occasion.

"For remember, *chères mesdemoiselles,* that this special fête extends very far beyond *la Société de Joie,* and that Hope Ashley, as an outside member, can be most useful. She is, please also recall, my first cousin and dearest friend. We do not want too many hostesses, but we require a certain number in order to allow the rest of the girls to be absolutely free to enjoy themselves to their hearts' desire."

As Joyce said these last words, she raised her beautiful, dark, deep eyes and suddenly encountered the puzzled, anxious, half-venomous, half-beseeching gaze of Françoise Dupuis.

"You have not long been a member of the Société," she remarked, smiling gently at the girl who meant to ruin her. "But if it will give you pleasure, we will also include you amongst the hostesses."

"It will give me very great pleasure, and I thank you, Queen," said Françoise, who found herself trembling not a little, who further found herself

shrinking away from Muriel's bold, defiant glance.

The hostesses having been secured, formal letters in their names were to be written to every member of the School. The girls of *la Société* took it on them to write these letters, Joyce having herself chosen the mode in which they were to be addressed, and the words in which they were to be couched. Suddenly, however, she stopped.

"*Arrêtez, s'il vous plaît, mesdemoiselles,*" she remarked, "these letters of invitation must be signed by *all* the hostesses. I have not yet obtained Hope Ashley's permission to make her a hostess. But I see her from here, walking alone in a distant part of the grounds. If you will permit me, dear demoiselles, I will go to her at once and speak to her."

When Joyce said, "if you will permit me," the words sounded much more like, "I intend to go whether you permit me or not."

No girl uttered a word, and the Queen of *la Société* dashed out of the room. The moment this happened, Muriel with a silent nod invited Françoise to take a place by her side.

"How ridiculous this all is," she remarked.

Françoise said, "I do not see anything ridiculous in it," and Muriel began to wonder if she would end by thoroughly disliking her new friend. After a minute of absolute silence one or two of the girls approached a tiny window and looked out on the scene below. No one who was enjoying herself in the sunny grounds troubled that same self to look up

at the windows which dimly lit the great front attic; but *from* these windows a very vivid scene could be beheld by those who happened to look on. Françoise was amongst those who happened to look on. After a minute's very earnest gaze, she turned and flung herself down on an old box near Muriel. Muriel immediately began to whisper to her in an eager voice, and Françoise shook her head vehemently several times. The rest of the girls of the Society could not hear a syllable which was spoken between the two; but there was not the slightest doubt that Françoise and Muriel were very strongly differing on more than one point, and that beyond doubt Françoise was getting the better of the controversy.

Meanwhile Joyce, her beautiful jet-black hair caught by a light spring breeze, flew across one of the lawns and presently touched Hope on the arm.

"Hope, *chérie,* my darling," she began.

Hope turned and looked at her dearest friend with all the love she was capable of in her eyes. Hope was not exactly a beautiful girl, but she looked more than beautiful at moments such as these. Hers was a beauty far beyond the beauty of the body; it was, in short, the beauty of the soul, and that beauty Hope Ashley possessed to a marked degree. Her charm lay in her expression; and her expression approached, yes, close, very close indeed, to the stars. Hope was quite well aware of the fact that Joyce had been asked to join that *Société* which she herself had declined to have anything to do with.

She had not, of course, mentioned a word; she had not, of course, breathed a syllable. She was bound by her own vows of secrecy not to influence Joyce one way or the other. She must not talk of *la Société* in the presence of Joyce. She had promised this when she refused to become a member, and she must keep her word, however bitter the cost, however great her fear that her dearest friend of all her friends, Joyce Selby, would also be snatched away from her. But, oh, happy, oh, wonderful day! Such was not the case. Beyond doubt Joyce had become a member, but far from losing Hope's affection, far from taking her own affection from Hope, she loved her as much as ever. She also did more; she contrived in the simplest, gentlest way in the world to bring Caterina de Mori back again to Hope as her friend. Hope had always dearly loved Caterina, and had much felt her defection. But now they were friends—friends, although secrets, like dead things, lay between them.

The joyful, eager voice of Joyce was heard, now coming nearer as she sped across the grass.

"Hi, Hope, hi! But you are—you are of the naughty ones! I want you—I want to speak to you. Listen, pray listen! I must hurry away again, and what I have to say is of—oh, such great importance."

Hope turned and gave one of her most radiant smiles.

"You are out of breath, Joyce *chérie,*" she said.

"If you have anything special to say to me, don't say it here where all the School can look at us. Come into the Beech Walk. We shall be unmolested, unnoticed in the Beech Walk."

Joyce got back her breath, and without a word followed her friend.

"Here we are secure from prying eyes," said Hope. "Now what is it you have to say to me, my —my darling?"

"Ah, Hope, Hope!" replied Joyce, "there is no one like you in all the world—no one to me like you, my own Hope, my very own Hope! And now I know you will grant my little favour—the favour that I beg of you."

"What is it?" asked Hope, speaking in some astonishment.

"I can put it to you," answered Joyce, "in a few plain words. This is the end of April; there comes May between, and then June—June, on to her longest, most glorious day; June to the twenty-first of her glorious month. Listen to me, do listen to me, Hope. I have—I've conceived a plan, and I have, what is more, consulted the Head Mistress."

"Madame la Comtesse de Trés?" exclaimed Hope in some astonishment.

"Yes, I have consulted with her, and she approves, she consents. She will do what we wish. My plan is this: I want to give a fête, ah, a great fête, to include every member of the School. It will be in one sense *my* fête, in another sense it will be

the fête of certain hostesses whom I—yes, I myself will select—whom I have, in short, selected. Don't ask me their names, beloved Hope. This fête has nothing to do with Societies or secret feasts of any sort. It is all open and above board. The money comes from me, and I do so love to spend it; and I want every girl in the School, every single one to be present and to be happy. The refreshments will be in a certain marquee which I think I can engage in the town of Tourelle; but there must—that is essential—there must be certain hostesses who will look after the guests one and all; who will see that they are provided with the necessary refreshments; who will guide them in the mazes of the dance; who will help them by their presence, their *chic* presence, *chérie,* and their wonderful tact. The letters of invitation will be signed by all the hostesses. Madame, as I tell you, has promised to attend. Dear Fräulein Schwann will attend; dear Miss Tabor will be present. But the fête will be altogether the work of the girls of La Chapelle, and we want *you* to be one of the hostesses, Hope Ashley—you, because you belong to me and because I cannot be happy without you. Will you consent, Hope *chérie?* Will you be a hostess of this fête which is no secret, and the invitations for which are to be sent out immediately? You must add your name to the other names. They ought all to go out this week if possible. I only want your consent. Will you consent, dearest Hope?"

"If you wish it," said Hope, after a pause. "But you have not yet told me who the other girls will be."

"Ah, but I have nothing to conceal. You know them one and all. There is Muriel St. John; there is Mlle. Juliette de Tournay; there is a girl whom perhaps you do not know, but she would like to join, and I think it would make her happy; her name is Françoise Dupuis."

Hope gave a sudden start.

"But," she exclaimed—"but that is the very girl whose admission into—ah, I must not say the words, for I am not permitted, but you know, Joyce, my darling; let me think, do let me think. Joyce do you really want me to be a hostess?"

"More than anything in the world," said Joyce. "In addition to the great marquee there will be several tents put up on the lawns, and I want you and I—yes, you and I, Hope, to take complete charge of one tent, which will be the largest and most significant of all. Thus we shall be together all the evening. Think of it, Hope, can you say no?"

"I, too, will make a condition," said Hope—"I will become a hostess if Edmée Leroux is also permitted to become a hostess."

"Ah, thank you, thank you," said Joyce. "That will be quite splendid and it shall be done. I like Edmée's dear, good, pretty face so much. I want very badly to know her better."

"And she wants to know you better, Joyce. But under existing conditions such a thing is impossible. Well, Joyce, I will speak to her, and she will consent for my sake. This is an affair of one evening only; and the idea is quite like my open-handed, generous Joyce."

Joyce kissed her hand frantically once or twice to her friend, then flew back to the house and found herself once again in the front attic.

CHAPTER XX.

PAUVRE LA VIPERE.

There was a good deal of confusion and commotion and fuss when Joyce Selby, having quite recovered her breath, stood before her young companions and repeated her news. At first there was a storm of indignation when the name of Edmée Leroux was mentioned as a *sine qua non* to the securing of Hope Ashley as a hostess. But Joyce stood firm and resolute, and after some angry words had been spoken Françoise Dupuis was seen to bend forward and whisper something to Muriel St. John—the whispering of which caused Muriel's brow to clear.

Joyce said in her calmest voice, "*I wish it.* I am absolute monarch of this *Société.* Edmée Leroux *is* to be invited."

With these words all the girls withdrew their objections, and Joyce with a slight, contented sigh, sat down to sketch the letter which was to be repeated, word for word, to each and every girl in the big School. A slightly different form of letter was to be addressed to the staff, but it was only to differ by a word or two; and there was to be again a more deferential way of approaching Madame la Com-

tesse de Trés. When the letters were composed, which took some little time, Joyce divided the writing of them between the thirty-two girls who now composed *la Société de Joie*. These letters were to be all in readiness for signature on that day week. Afterwards the Committee broke up, and Françoise and Muriel went away to consult together. Françoise was vain—very ugly people often are; and now that she was to be promoted to the position of hostess she determined to write immediately to *la belle mère* for a suitable and becoming dress for the great occasion. *La belle mère* had such admirable taste. Muriel ventured to suggest that Françoise would look best in white, but Françoise herself inclined to the palest of blue; and Muriel allowed her to go her own way, feeling quite certain that whatever dress poor Françoise appeared in, would injure, not improve, her appearance. A strange revulsion of feeling had come over Muriel. The girl who was to be her tool, and effect that mischief which she so earnestly desired, was not any longer in her heart of hearts her chosen friend; she would be, of course, *outwardly* her friend until the great catastrophe had taken place —until Joyce Selby was dethroned. But if Françoise made up her mind to be Queen of the Society, and if such an absurd request was granted, she, Muriel St. John, would leave it. She could not possibly work under such a Queen as Françoise. No, it was impossible, impossible! She reflected further that her leaving the Society immediately after the

dethroning of Joyce would speak exceedingly well for her. Nevertheless she felt nervous—more nervous, more frightened, than she had ever been in her life before.

"I think we did wrong to permit this fête to take place," she said.

Françoise laid her hand on Muriel's arm.

"*Chère petite,*" she exclaimed, "it is only for the once; before the next fête for the poor and the dirty—ah, bah!—Joyce Selby will be expelled, and I—ah! *I* shall reign in her stead."

"I don't know how I shall dare to propose such a thing to the girls, Françoise," cried Muriel. "You are not even on the Committee. It will be considered something quite outrageous."

"And pray was Joyce Selby on the Committee," asked Françoise in her bitterest tone, her face wearing its very ugliest expression.

"No, no, but you surely do not compare yourself to Joyce Selby—she who is noble by birth, and possesses one of the finest places in England."

"I care not," replied Françoise. "You may if you like think her noble and great, whereas I think her *ig*noble and small. But keep to her if you like, *chère* Muriel; let her rule you with that little delicate rod of steel which she does wear; let her go on proposing fête after fête for the poor and the dirty. Let her take the joy out of *la Société de Joie.* I care not; I only help you—only help you on one condition, Muriel St. John."

"Well, well, let it be—let it be for the present," said Muriel. "Of course I don't choose to be ruled over by Joyce Selby; but there is time enough. *My* Society shall not crumble to the dust. I will see how best to accede to your wishes, Françoise, but don't let us talk any more on the subject now."

The girls wandered away, and Françoise, seeing that she had gone a little too far, tried to entertain her friend, who was in reality her friend no longer, by talking about Paris and describing the delights of the gayest capital in the world. Françoise told Muriel that *la belle mère* would beyond a doubt invite her, Muriel, to the new and beautiful house; and she should see for herself—with her own eyes, the great palace of Versailles; the ruins of St. Cloud; and, in addition, she would be taken to theatres—oh, the most ravishing, and behold with her own eyes how the well-trained French girl could dance.

Muriel was excited and pleased at this prospect; and when Françoise further went on to arrange that *Madame la belle mère* should help Muriel to buy dresses in the French style, which was—oh, so *much* more beautiful than the English style, Muriel, proud English girl that she was, forgot her dislike to her new friend, and ceased to think of resigning her own position as a member of the Committee of *la Société de Joie*.

Meanwhile two girls, unobserved by either Muriel or Françoise, stepped out of the little bower in the rose garden, and began to walk rapidly, arm in arm,

together. These girls were Jeanne Gérusez and Edmée Leroux. Edmée was expostulating with some fervour, and Jeanne was talking to her in very earnest tones.

"I say that thou wilt do it, chèrie Edmée," was her remark; "for I know—I will not tell how; I will not tell *where* I learnt it—that there is mischief afoot. I am only a little daughter of the people, as thou, Edmée Leroux, art also a daughter of the people. Nevertheless there *is* mischief afoot, and we must band together, you and I, to discover all we can about it; for no one will suspect *us* of suspecting anything. Thou, Edmée Leroux," said Jeanne Gérusez, "lovest the beautiful Joyce Selby. Thou dost also love that *magnifique* and gracious demoiselle who goes by the name of Hope Ashley. I tell thee, Edmée Leroux, for their sakes we must combine—we must watch, we must listen, we must be careful. The opportunity is given to us because thou art to be a hostess at the great fête. On that account —ah, *mais oui*—on that account alone—thou must *not* refuse."

"If thou dost indeed think so, Jeanne Gérusez, I will not refuse," said Edmée.

"Then that is well," exclaimed Jeanne, "and Henri and Citoyenne Pelven will assuredly help us."

The girls talked together for a little longer. They did not even disclose to each other their plans, but many, many thoughts rose in each mind; the one

chief and principal object in the hearts of each of these young girls was to save Joyce Selby from an unknown and yet very perceptible and real danger.

Shortly after their brief conversation, Jeanne Gérusez went into the great *salle* or hall where the girls sat before retiring to rest. Those girls were there who had written their letters, who had bidden Madame la Comtesse good night, who were waiting for the signal which would send them to their different domiciles. They were not anxious, they were quietly waiting. It was at this hour that Henri of the black, black eyes appeared to collect the letters. Each girl, with absolute confidence, put her letter into his hand; some of course had none to put, but all that had did so with absolute faith and a sense of relief. To write home was more or less tiresome. To keep secrets was more or less wearisome. In consequence of *la Société de Joie,* and in consequence of many other minor societies belonging to the School, the girls felt themselves pulled in, at every turn. They could not by any possibility speak freely to the loved ones at home; therefore they wrote with a certain stiffness, a certain want of true confidence which would not occur in an English School, and which would not have happened in this School where Madame la Comtesse was head—Madame with her many English ideas and English desires—were it not for the existence of the *Société de Joie.* But alas for Madame! She knew nothing whatsoever about this *Société.* All she

could possibly guess was that mesdemoiselles had their own private affairs, and that she herself acted best for them by not interfering.

On this special occasion there were fewer letters than usual for that most adorable and much esteemed page-boy, Henri, to put into his bag.

He flung them in with the quick movement of a professional postman. He then bade *bonne nuit aux demoiselles* and turned immediately to leave the premises. His work for the day was over.

He had but to carry his bag of treasures to *Tante Citoyenne Pelven.* He had but to watch her as her quick eyes roamed over the letters, taking in what she could from the mere addresses, for with all her faults she was an honourable woman, and would not attempt to open a letter from *les demoiselles.* As, however, on this occasion Henri was about to start off at a swinging pace through the grounds and along the straight road which led to Tourelle, he was startled by a touch, light as a feather, on his shoulder. He gave a quite perceptible start, and saw the well-known face and figure of Jeanne Gérusez, that maiden whom he and his aunt had stigmatised as *La vipère.* He felt a slight degree of shame now as he looked at Jeanne's anxious eyes, and perceived by the light of the moon her troubled face.

"Henri," exclaimed Jeanne, "I am not, believe me, doing anything that would be called wrong. I have obtained permission from Madame la Comtesse de Très to spend this night with *la famille* of

Edmée Laroux in the *rue St. Honoré,* and I thought I would go with you first, Henri, and watch you and Citoyenne Pelven as you look at the writing on the letters. Afterwards perhaps, Henri, you will conduct me to the home of my friend in the *rue St. Honoré.*"

"*Mais certainement, mademoiselle,*" replied Henri. He felt, however, most uncomfortable.

Jeanne trotted along contentedly by his side. As they approached the flickering lights of the little town, she said in her soft Southern voice:

"Thou dost not mind, Henri, that I have discovered thy secret? Thou art but a poor boy of the people, and I am—I am a demoiselle of the people. My kind friends, Edmée Leroux's people, who are also related to me, have invited me to spend this night with them, and Madame—ah, Madame, she is always gracious—she gives the necessary permission. I have known for a long time, Henri, that thou and thy good aunt, Citoyenne Pelven, read the addresses on our letters. You have done good, not harm, by so acting; and think not for a moment that I will tell; that I will take the post of page-boy from thee, Henri, or injure thy good and worthy aunt. I know that she does call me *la vipère.* Ah, Henri, thou hast cause to blush, for I do not indeed belong to that venomous species. And I want you to help me—to help me to save, yes, to save one who is most dear to me because she belongs to my dearest

friend in the School. *Comprenez-vous,* Henri? *Comprenez-vous* the words of *la vipère?*"

"I beg a thousand pardons, mademoiselle," said Henri. "I will speak to my good aunt, 'the little mother,' as I call her. She will receive thee with open arms, mademoiselle."

By and by they reached the *pâtisserie* of that excellent woman, Citoyenne Pelven. The good Citoyenne was very much startled when she saw the little black-robed *vipère* entering her abode; but by and by they had a long talk together, the result of which was that Citoyenne went on her knees, allowed the tears to flow rapidly from her jet-black eyes, and confessed that Jeanne Gérusez, instead of being a *vipère* was an angel—*ah, oui,* an angel! and of the most heavenly sort. Henri was taken into full confidence. The coming fête was discussed between the three. Citoyenne Pelven's black eyes flashed as she promised to do her utmost—yes, her very utmost; and eventually Henri and little Jeanne Gérusez started off in the direction of the *rue St. Honoré,* where the large and flourishing house of M. Leroux, the vine-grower, was situated.

"*Ah, oui, oui,*" said Citoyenne to herself, after the girl and boy had departed. "How little dost thou know, thou foolish soul? *La mademoiselle c'est bonne, c'est bonne.* She and that good Edmée, and myself and Henri my nephew, we will in very truth save the School. She is no *vipère,* is little Jeanne Gérusez, but an angel of light; and she has

come in the nick of time. I respect her, I adore her, I grieve mightily for what I said against her; but, ah, *c'est vrai, c'est vrai,* the human heart makes mistakes. I thought her a *vipère* in very truth; but it is the other who is a cobra—nay, more, a boa-constrictor, *n'est-ce pas?* Will she not try to crush the life out of the School? Ah, but she shall not; it cannot be. The little angel comes in time to prevent, and the little angel conquers the powers of darkness."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PALE-BLUE DRESS.

WHATEVER steps may or may not have been taken by Citoyenne Pelven, by Henri, by Jeanne Gérusez, by Edmée Leroux, the preparations for the feast—for the great, magnificent fête—went on without interruption. The letters were carefully written; they were written, of course, in the French tongue; and each letter was read by Joyce Selby before she affixed her signature, under which immediately was placed the signature of Hope Ashley, under which again appeared the signatures of Muriel St. John, Juliette de Tournay, the Comtesse Caterina, Françoise Dupuis, and finally the name of Edmée Leroux. It took some little time to write all these letters and to affix the signatures properly. They could not possibly be done in the great front attic, for that would be giving away the secret of *la Société de Joie*. It was therefore arranged that the girls who wrote the letters should meet in the summerhouse, and standing by the central table should each read over each letter and each append her own signature.

At last the task was finished, and Henri was com-

missioned to convey the different letters to the various invited guests. There was a slight difference between those letters which were addressed to the School generally, and those which were addressed to the Staff. There was again a still greater difference in the letter which was sent to la Comtesse de Trés. But be the difference what it might, the letters were substantially the same. The undersigned were giving a fête; the fête was to take place on the twenty-first of June; it was to take place in the grounds; and the undersigned were to act as hostesses. The fête would commence at seven o'clock in the evening to the moment, and would end at midnight. Nothing whatever was said with regard to the nature of the fête, but there was a joyousness in the whole tone of the invitation, which prophesied well for the great occasion.

Joyce having got her invitations off her mind, now turned her attention to other matters. She went herself in the company of Edmée Leroux to have a long interview with Citoyenne Pelven, and her orders for different refreshments were certainly on a most lavish scale. The marquee was procured, where the different refreshments would be spread out; and Joyce ordered six different tents which were to stand at intervals over the lawns on this great occasion. The excitement of the School became great, it became indeed furious. What was that lovely, rich English girl going to do? What unexpected fun and pleasure lay before them?

They were quite clever enough, these French demoiselles, to guess that the real mistress of the ceremonies was Joyce Selby, and that the names of the other hostesses were simply used for effect. Nevertheless the hostesses in question were by no means allowed to be idle. They must, whatever happened, take their parts, receive their guests, and attend to each minutia of the programme which Joyce marked out. She had everything very clear in her compact little head, and she and Hope consulted much over the matter. For a time everything seemed to go very smoothly. There were several weeks to run between now and the twenty-first of June; and during that time the hostesses, by the express permission of Madame la Comtesse, were allowed to take possession of the summerhouse. It no longer, therefore, for the present belonged to the *Société de Joie;* it belonged, in fact, to the great fête given by the English heiress, Joyce Selby, of Coning's Tower Castle in Warwickshire. Madame had given strict orders that no one was to interfere with the young hostesses; they were to meet whenever they liked in the summerhouse, and anyone who attempted to disturb them, would do so under extreme displeasure.

The first jar or blot in the arrangements arose from the fact that Françoise Dupuis had written to *la belle mère* for a dress of the most charming, most exquisite, and palest shade of blue. *Madame la belle mère* had taken pleasure in carrying out her stepdaughter's instructions, and the dress arrived.

The dress was—oh, ravishing. Muriel felt a degree of envy flashing through her mind when she noticed its extreme grace and elegance.

"Even an ugly girl would look well in such a dress," she said to herself; and then she looked at Françoise, observing the pallor of her light-blue eyes, the pallor of her cheeks, her unimportant, mean little features, and said to herself that her quondam friend, who had long ceased to be her friend at heart, was certain to look well in this forget-me-not blue dress. She remarked with an inward shudder how clever was Françoise, how well she knew what would suit her; for the blue would add colour to her eyes, and a delicate sort of transparency to her cheeks. With a little care she could even look passable on this great occasion. Muriel, who had a good deal of taste for dress, felt certain that she could arrange the hair of the daughter of the French *avocat* so as to make her look very well on the occasion of the fête. As this thought flashed through her mind, Françoise raised her pale-blue eyes and said in an imploring voice to Muriel:

"I am fair and ugly; you are fair and beautiful. If you, Muriel, will dress my hair for me on the evening of the fête, I will ask *la belle mère* to send you a dress in every respect to correspond with mine. She will do it in a moment, for she is rich, *ma belle mère,* and wishes me to make friends in the School. And I have spoken to her of you, Muriel, and she approves of you and will give you a dress the coun-

terpart of mine. I will write to her if you, on your part, will promise to arrange my hair as it ought to be done. It is not nearly so golden as yours, but it is my best feature after all, and could be made the most of. Will you do this for me chère Muriel?"

Muriel could not quite understand why a choking and angry sensation rose up in her heart; but before she had time to make a single reply the joyous little face of Edmée Leroux peeped into the bower in the rose garden. Her lips made a sudden exclamation as she noticed the lovely dress, and then she said:

"You are wanted, both of you, to come immediately into the summerhouse. All the rest of the hostesses are present, and you must come and—and quickly, or you will be late."

"If I were you," said Muriel, suddenly turning to Françoise, "I would bring the lovely dress with me. The other hostesses will like to look at it."

Edmée gave a start of some dismay, half-opened her lips to speak, but on second thoughts, held her tongue. The dress was quickly placed in its box, and the three girls sped across the lawn.

"I sent for you all," said Joyce, "to speak on a matter of some importance. Ah, Françoise, you are bringing a box with you."

"Yes," replied Françoise, "the box contains my dress—the dress that I shall wear on the night when I am one of your hostesses, Joyce. My good stepmother ordered it for me in Paris, and it has just arrived. You would like to see it, *peut-être?*"



As she spoke she lifted the dress from its box.—*Page* 283.

Joyce was silent, but her pretty face with its glowing colour turned a trifle pale. Françoise noticed nothing; she was absorbed in the ecstasy of unfolding her exquisite dress.

"See, see," she cried, "the little shoes the same colour, the fan the same shade, the wreath of forget-me nots to twine round the hair, which could only be made in that city of delight, Paris; and now, now, mesdemoiselles, behold the dress! Is it not at once simple, elegant, superb?"

As she spoke she lifted the dress from its box and held it out for the other girls to look at.

"You will like me in a dress like this, won't you, Joyce?" she cried, and for the time being her face was amiable and her eyes bright with happiness.

Joyce Selby gave a short, quick sigh; then she gathered herself together. She felt like one for whom a trap had been laid, but she was not going for a single instant to fall into its midst.

"Dear Françoise," she remarked, "the dress is, as you say, most beautiful, and it would—yes, it *would* suit you; and it—yes, it seems a pity."

"What do you mean by a pity?" asked Françoise, all the light of joy leaving her face, and her old discontented expression returning.

"I only mean this," said Joyce, "that I thought you knew. It was arranged some time ago. We left—oh, I remember now—you had a headache and could not be present; but Muriel was present, and

Muriel has always seemed to be a great friend of yours."

"So she is, of course she is," said Françoise, catching Muriel's arm in a sort of vise, and dragging her forward as she spoke. "Muriel St. John, you are my friend, my great friend."

"Well, we left it to her to tell you," said Joyce. "We thought she would naturally tell you at once. The hostesses are all to be in white, very, very simple white, made of muslin clear and cool—clear, cool, and very soft. They are to be arranged in a sort of Watteau style and will reach the ground at the back, not more in any case than four inches. The shoes are also to be white, and the stockings, and there is to be no ornament of any sort whatsoever, except the badge of the hostess, which I myself will have the honour of presenting to each hostess on the night of the fête. I will not tell you beforehand what that badge will be, for that is my secret, small and secure. Françoise, I am truly sorry, but you cannot wear that lovely blue frock on the night of the fête unless, indeed, you give up being a hostess."

"And that I will not do—that I cannot do," said Françoise.

"Very well, we will leave it so. Your dress is being made, all the dresses are being made, in the house under my special directions. They are my gift to the hostesses; their aim is simplicity. They

signify a pure heart, which, I trust, as far as possible, we all possess."

The beautiful blue dress was swept out of sight, and then Joyce continued:

"I am exceedingly sorry for you, Françoise, and cannot imagine how Muriel forgot, for she certainly gave me one of your dresses to copy."

"She did *not* forget," said Françoise in her sulkiest voice, and she sat down on a corner of the bench which ran round the summerhouse. No one could call her face even approaching beauty now; there was even a malignancy in her glance as she turned and looked for a minute at Muriel. It was a swift glance, a vindictive glance, from which Muriel turned away.

"I have now sent for you," continued Joyce, "to read aloud to you a few verses which I heartily wish were better, but which I intend to be sung by a choir in white, as Madame la Comtesse approaches the largest tent, which Hope Ashley and I have reserved for her honour. She knows nothing whatever about the verses, and nothing whatever about the tent; and after we have brought her some refreshments from the marquee, she will of course join the rest of the girls. For it is not at all our dear Madame's way to make herself in any sense of the word exclusive. Will you kindly, Muriel St. John, read these words and see if they satisfy the sentiments of the other hostesses. I can only say that I am not a great poet, and wish with all my heart I could do better."

As Joyce spoke she passed a paper across the table to Muriel, but to the astonishment of everyone present Muriel did not take it up. She nodded to Hope, who immediately turning to Joyce, said:

"Shall I read your lines, dear Joyce?"

Joyce nodded. Hope had a very beautiful voice, and the ringing sort of measure she now put into the very simple words had their due effect on all present.

"You will please imagine," she began, "that on the great occasion of the fête these words will be sung, not read. They will be sung by twelve white-robed maidens, who will take different parts, and who will be, from this moment, most carefully trained. This is exactly how Joyce Selby has written them. Imagine to yourselves the scene, the sunshine, the happiness."

There was a little pause. Then Hope read in her sweet, melodious voice the following words:

"Come shine, come rain, come joy, come pain,
We claim this day, this longest day,
To greet our young companions gay.

With them we dance across the lawn,
With them we watch the summer dawn;
To us comes pleasure
In fullest measure.

We are young, we are gay, we are glad;
We refuse beyond words to be sad.
Trouble may come by and by;
We will not believe it nigh.

Why should we meet its gloom on this summer day,
  This day of June with the heart of May?
We cannot, we will not, be sad;
  In our innermost hearts we are glad.

For are not the roses in flower?
  Do not the honeysuckles scent our bower?
Mesdemoiselles, behold! we love you;
  Teachers, behold! we adore you.

Madame la Comtesse, we cluster at your feet;
  Here and now, most beloved, in your School, we greet you;
Here and now, most dear, we show our love to you.

Beloved Madame, in future we go your way;
  We go your way each day, all day, every day.
Chère Madame, the School does you greet;
  Your scholars surround you and fall at your feet."

The verses died away. Hope's happy power of putting immense expression into each word she uttered was not lost on the present occasion. The young Committee of *la Société de Joie,* the young hostesses of the great fête, all alike felt that no singing voices could equal the melody and passion and power of this speaking voice. A lump arose in more than one young throat; more than one girl looked with adoration at Joyce Selby; more than one girl looked with admiration unspeakable at Hope Ashley, with her beautiful gift of voice, which in itself was as great as the gift of song.

The only person who was quite silent, who made no remark of any sort, was Françoise Dupuis. She had laid one very thin hand on the box which con-

tained her beautiful pale-blue dress. When the reading had come to an end, she was the first to rise, holding the box which contained her treasure securely under her arm.

"Is there anything more you wish to say to us, Mademoiselle Joyce?" she enquired.

"Nothing at all to-day, Françoise," replied Joyce, her voice and eyes alike full of pity.

Françoise took no notice whatsoever of the pitying eyes and pitying voice.

"Then, *pour moi,* I will depart," she said.

Muriel was about to accompany her, but with a wave of her hand she motioned her back.

As soon as ever Françoise and her box, with its pale-blue shimmering robe, had passed out of sight, Joyce turned to Muriel.

"At the best of it, Muriel," she remarked, "yes, at the best of it—and I will not impute unkind motives to anyone—it seems a very *sad* pity that you should not have mentioned to Françoise that all the hostesses without a single exception were to wear white Watteau dresses. Doubtless you forgot, Muriel; but it does seem a sad pity."

"Of course I forgot," said Muriel. "Do you think I did it on purpose? Françoise is a very vain little thing and thought to overcome her ugliness by means of dress. For my part"—here she gave a harsh, discordant laugh—"I think the lesson she is learning serves her right."

"And I do not," said Joyce. "These are not, in

the ordinary sense of the word, lessons at all. They hurt most cruelly; they utterly destroy the spirit of good that is in one. If it were not too late—far too late, I would have all the hostesses in palest of blue. I hate hurting a girl's feelings."

"Well, thank goodness, it is too late," said Muriel. "With all your *haute noblesse,* Joyce Selby, you are trying to spoil that worthless girl, Françoise Dupuis. Oh, if you but knew; if you could only guess!"

"If I knew what? If I could guess what?" asked Joyce.

"Ah, I must not tell," replied Muriel. "There are secrets within secrets in this School, *n'est-ce pas,* Edmée Leroux?"

Edmée's bright little face turned pale; she gazed at Muriel in untold amazement but did not open her lips. Meanwhile further arrangements were being made for the approaching fête. The dress of the fairies was being arranged, the dance of the fairies was to be practised. No expense was to be spared. If, on a great occasion like the present, everyone did not do of their uttermost best, Joyce Selby felt that she would sink into the very ground with shame. The fairies were all without exception belonging to the *Société de Joie.* Each fairy was to wear a different-coloured robe, light and thin as gossamer; some were to appear in purple and grey; some in blue and mauve; some again in white and pink; some, yet again, were to emulate the magnificent shades of the beautiful sweet peas. The whole ef-

fect was to be dazzling; and on the head of each fairy was to be carefully placed a tiny electric lamp, which was to mingle with the flowers round the same head, and was to give the effect of a shining star. The fairies would not appear upon the scene until the first refreshments, at least, had come to an end. They were then to rush forward in a gay band—a band of irrepressible mirth. Laughter was to issue from their lips; the little fairy light was to reflect its brilliance into their eyes; their dress itself was to single them out as fairies in the true sense of the word. They were to intertwine hands and arms; they were to dance in groups and singly; they were to be here, there, and everywhere; the fairies would, in short, make a very great feature of the entertainment.

Joyce, as usual, was ready with her purse and her suggestions. Nothing would induce her to have anything but the very best at the fête which Madame la Comtesse honoured by her presence. But while there was mirth and laughter and eager conversation going on between the young promoters of the fête, Muriel St. John was watching her opportunity to glide away. She was really afraid of Françoise; she wanted to make friends with Françoise, and as quickly as possible. Joyce, however, and also Hope, seemed to read her design in her eyes, and whenever she approached the door of the summerhouse, they called her back to ask her advice on this point and the other. On another occasion Muriel would have

been flattered, but now she was too miserable to be flattered. She could only think of what might become of her if Françoise really turned against her.

At last, however, the meeting of the hostesses came to an end. The girls dispersed here and there in the soft delicious summer breeze. They all talked eagerly, rapidly, impulsively; and naturally their one subject was the fête—the coming fête.

As soon as ever she found herself alone, Muriel set to work to search for Françoise. Her uneasiness grew very great when she could not see her anywhere; it was one of the most stringent rules of the School that no demoiselle ever entered her bedroom without special leave during the daytime. But Muriel was now so miserable that she resolved to break this rule, and search for Françoise in that little cubicle which had at one time been the home of prayer of some deeply religious nun. Françoise being a French girl, slept in one of the lower dormitories, and Muriel ran quickly down the length of the great corridor which led into the different cubicles. As a rule, during the daytime, the curtains of the said cubicles were drawn back to their fullest extent, and the French windows were fastened back so as to allow as much summer air and sunshine as possible to invade the otherwise narrow premises. As Muriel approached, walking quickly and humming a little song under her breath, she observed with a beating heart that one curtain was drawn—drawn fully and right across. She even heard the sound

of voices; the voices that she distinctly recognised were those of Jeanne Gérusez and Edmée Leroux. But another voice, somewhat different from theirs, joined in. This voice Muriel had no difficulty in recognising as the voice of her own special friend, Françoise Dupuis. There was a sob in the girl's throat, joined to a certain sensation which might be revenge, which might be anger, which might, in short, be anything. Muriel felt that all her fears were justified. She tapped impatiently on the panel which supported the curtain at one side of the little cubicle. Instantly on doing this there was silence within; then Jeanne Gérusez put out her face.

"What is it you want, Muriel St. John?" was her remark. "You cannot possibly come in here. We are occupied; go away please."

"Yes, go away please," said the kinder tone of Edmée Leroux.

Muriel could have stamped her foot, but she restrained herself. After a minute's pause she said:

"I have come to seek my friend, Françoise Dupuis. I have something of importance to say to her; and please understand, mesdemoiselles, that you have none of you any right to be in your cubicles in the daytime, and that I can report on this conduct if I wish."

There came a laugh from inside the room—a bitter, very sour sort of laugh. Muriel distinctly heard the words spoken.

"Tell her to do her worst; tell her I'm not the least afraid of her."

But at the same moment, Jeanne was pushed aside and Edmée stood in the little opening made by the drawn-back curtain.

"I think," she said in her pleasant voice, "that it would be wisest for you to leave us for the present, Muriel; and I do not consider," she continued, "that you can possibly make a complaint, for you yourself, in coming to seek a girl here, distinctly break the rules. Go away now, please; I assure you it will be wisest and best."

"So you say," remarked Muriel; but she knew there was absolute truth in the words, and she retired, having fully made up her mind not to take any steps that might injure Françoise Dupuis. It suddenly darted through her brain that if only she herself had not been so mean and spiteful as not to tell Françoise of the proposed dress for the hostesses, all might possibly be well. Even now was it too late? Joyce seemed greatly disturbed at having hurt Françoise in not allowing her to wear the lovely blue dress. A similar blue dress would suit Muriel herself to perfection. Suppose—oh, suppose she saw Joyce and implored of her not to destroy Françoise's happiness; in short, to allow all the hostesses to appear in blue? Money was of no moment to Joyce—there was heaps of time for this alteration, and the white dresses would come in later, they need not be thrown away. Muriel was a

very impulsive girl; her eyes were now exceedingly bright with excitement, and after some little difficulty she found Joyce surrounded as usual by a bevy of her friends. These girls looked anything but favourably at Muriel; but both Hope and Joyce gave her their usual cordial greeting. As a matter of fact they were both sorry for her. They were greatly disgusted with her conduct, but that did not prevent their being sorry. Muriel came quickly forward.

"Joyce, Joyce!" she exclaimed. "May I speak to you quite alone?"

"*Mais oui, certainement,*" replied Joyce. She rose as she spoke, nodded brightly to her young companions, and followed Muriel across the grounds and into the beechwood.

"I can quite understand that you are sorry, Muriel," she said; "and your coming to see me and speak to me alone proves the fact. My dear, dear friend, it does seem such a cruel pity to do a mean or a wrong action; such actions are like birds—birds of ill omen; they invariably come home to roost."

"But I was thinking—thinking," said Muriel in a choking voice, "that perhaps you—you, Joyce, could put the wrong right. You yourself partly suggested it, didn't you?"

"What did I suggest?" asked Joyce in a tone of some wonder.

"Why you—you hinted that it was very cruel on Françoise to prohibit her wearing her blue dress;

and you hinted further that all the hostesses might be in blue instead of white, wearing the same exceedingly delicate and very beautiful shade which the dress of Françoise is composed of."

Joyce gave herself a sort of impatient shake.

"For a moment the idea did flash through my mind," she said, "but I assure you, Muriel, it was only for a moment. Nothing would induce the other hostesses to submit to the vargaries of one, however sorry we may feel for that one. It can't be done, Muriel, and there is no use talking about it. Had you fulfilled your mission and gone straight to Françoise and told her about the exact dresses that the hostesses would wear, her *belle mère* could have had it made for her in Paris, in the Watteau style and with all the finish which a Parisian dress attains to. It seems a sad pity, Muriel, that you did *not* tell. For my part I cannot possibly understand your conduct."

"I—I forgot," said Muriel, in a muffled tone. "I would have told her had I remembered." She stopped abruptly; then she continued, bringing out her words very fast, "You don't know how she feels it. She is fearfully cut up."

"I'm afraid I cannot help," said Joyce, and the tone of Joyce Selby at that moment was like ice. "I did not think—no, I did not think, that you would stoop to a great *untruth,* Muriel St. John. You are an English girl, and we of England abhor lies. How can you pretend that you forgot, when

you gave us one of Françoise's dresses to copy? I am ashamed of you, Muriel; yes, most bitterly ashamed."

It was impossible even for Muriel to guess that one who was usually so bright, so gay, so full of *la joie de vivre,* could look as Joyce looked then; that her deep, dark eyes could flash as they did at that moment; that the indignant colour could mount to her cheeks; and that she should turn absolutely away, utterly and completely forsaking Muriel, who found, indeed, at that instant, that the way of transgressors is hard.

CHAPTER XXII.

RESPITE.

On the evening of that same day, Edmée Leroux, accompanied by Jeanne Gérusez and Frongoise Dupuis, and accompanied also by Henri Sarci, might have been seen leaving the grounds of La Chapelle together. The days were getting long now; the evenings were stretching out. A beautiful golden night seemed to lie upon the land.

Edmée Leroux had obtained permission from Madame la Comtesse de Trés to take her friend, Jeanne Gérusez, and her other friend, Françoise Dupuis, to spend the night in the great house of the vine-grower in the *rue St. Honoré*. There was nothing to prevent the acceptance of this little treat, and Madame was glad that Edmée should invite her friends to her father's magnificent house and entertain them there after her own fashion. The conference between the girls had been made in the cubicle of Françoise Dupuis, and all arrangements were quickly carried into effect. Madame having given permission, the next thing was to secure the services of that model page-boy, Henri; for he was to conduct the young ladies to the *rue St. Honoré*. He was

to take them there and leave them there; and no one suspected anything underhand, or in any sense low, in the proceedings. Henri appeared, as usual, in the great *salle* to receive his letters, and was immediately afterwards joined in the grounds by three black-robed little figures, namely—Edmée, Jeanne Gérusez and Françoise Dupuis. Henri seemed to be in strange spirits, and when they got outside the grounds and found themselves on the straight, dusty high road, he gave vent to a little chuckle, which occasionally indeed reached a sort of *houp-la,* an expression of which the said Henri was very fond. The girls themselves were almost silent, but Henri kept up a chatter of small talk. The moon shone brightly on the four little figures, and no one noticed on this night, which might really be called a summer's night, the silence of the three girls, the ecstasy and immeasurable delight of the one boy.

"Houp-la! houp-la!" cried Henri again and yet again; and then he conducted the demoiselles quite away from the magnificent residence of Edmée Leroux's father, and approached that winding street where Citoyenne Pelven lived. Her dutiful nephew had given this good woman time to prepare for her guests, and she had cups of smoking hot *chocolat* mixed with whipped cream, awaiting their pleasure; and a great "*plat,*" as she called it, which contained *gâteaux* and various other dainty sweetmeats.

"*Ah, mes enfants, mes enfants!*" she cried, and she took the hands of the two girls, Jeanne Gérusez

and Edmée Leroux. She then looked inquisitively into the flushed face of Françoise Dupuis. "I used to call this *chère demoiselle 'la vipère,'*" she said, laying her hand on Jeanne's little shoulder. "I made my mistake—a mistake of the greatest, for I compared one of the angels of Heaven to a venomous beast. Ah, but there is another demoiselle at La Chapelle on whom I have conferred the name of *'la cobra'*; can she possibly be standing before me? Am I wrong in all my ideas?"

Françoise burst into a low and nervous laugh.

"I am the one you have called *'la cobra,' Madame,*" she said; "but I wish to tell you, here and now, that the real *cobra* is not myself, but is one who is known in the School of La Chapelle as Muriel St. John. She wishes to effect the ruin of one Joyce Selby, because the gracious and good Joyce has excited her envy and jealousy, and because the gracious and bountiful Joyce wishes to help the poor and hungry and suffering of Tourelle. She earnestly begged of me to help her to this end. She put upon me the work of the most—oh, the most abominable, wishing to keep out of it herself. But, Citoyenne Pelven, I refuse in future to have anything to do with Muriel St. John. She is not my friend. Edmée Leroux is my friend, Jeanne Gérusez is my friend, but not—oh, not Muriel. She may go her own way—I care not; for I hate her—oh, most mightily. She has done me a cruel, a spiteful wrong; and I, Françoise Dupuis, daughter of the

Parisian *avocat,* refuse to have anything to say to her or her doings in the future. *Peut-être,* Citoyenne, she may find other demoiselles to carry out her wicked ways, but I—I refuse. I belong to Jeanne, I belong to Edmée, I belong to Joyce and to Hope. I will not touch that *canaille* which is called by the name of Muriel St. John.

"And thou dost right, *mon enfant,*" said the Citoyenne in a voice of great triumph. "Now drink thy *chocolat* while it is hot; and munch thy *gâteaux,* which are fresh and *délicieux.* Afterwards we will talk a little. Thou art right, *mon enfant;* and thou art not, indeed, a cobra. Ah! what mistakes this *pauvre citoyenne* does make!"

The girls sat down to their meal, which, truth to tell, they heartily enjoyed, and Henri stood by and helped them, his aunt promising him an excellent supply of hot and nourishing viands when he had conducted *les demoiselles* to the *rue St. Honoré,* but on no account before.

"For it is not right," said Madame, "that thou shouldst sit with *les demoiselles* of La Chapelle, little son; but thy turn will come afterwards. Ah, but there is little to fear."

"Little mother," replied Henri, "I trust thee from the bottom of my heart."

So the cakes were eaten, the hot nourishing chocolate partaken of; and then Françoise, in a few terse and indignant words, told the good Citoyenne exactly what had befallen her on that day.

"Ah, but it was a mean, mean act," said Citoyenne. "And to think that the real cobra is after all Mademoiselle Muriel St. John! *Mais oui, mais oui,* it is *très difficile* for a poor woman to understand. First *thou* wert *la vipère,* little Jeanne; then *thou* wert *la cobra,* Mamzelle Françoise Dupuis; and now the real *cobra* turns out to be Mamzelle Muriel St. John. Ah, well, well, if we save our gracious ladies from spies and plots, all will turn out for the best."

The three girls gazed at the good Citoyenne with extreme earnestness. It seemed to Jeanne that she already knew her well. As to Edmée, had she not ever and always been her dear friend? Had it not been her joy to bring Citoyenne Pelven the first and finest of the early grapes that grew on the rugged hill-side. Had she not given them with a tender love, which shone in her big brown eyes and trembled round her expressive lips. Yes, beyond doubt these two girls knew the Citoyenne and loved her; but up to the present, Françoise had not even met her—Françoise, who was mentioned by her as *'la cobra, la boa-constrictor'*; Françoise, who was ugly of the ugly; whose mean, small features could not but attract attention the very reverse of favourable. And yet it was on this special occasion that Françoise declared herself; that, in short, she opened her heart. She rose from her seat by the little, round table, and going up to the Citoyenne, put her thin arms round the good woman's neck.

"Ah, love me, love me, even though I am ugly," cried Françoise. "Love me just because I am myself—a lonely girl pining for love. Love me because I want your love, chère Citoyenne; won't you—won't you try?"

As she spoke, tears filled the small, blue eyes. A look of tenderness and deep affection softened and changed the meagre features. Citoyenne Pelven felt her great heart rise to the occasion.

"*Ma pauvre, ma pauvre!*" she cried, and she clasped the lonely girl to her breast. She held her there, very firm, very close, for a moment or two; and when at last she loosened her embrace, there were tears in the jet-black eyes as well as in the pale-blue ones.

"Yes, *ma pauvre,* I will love thee," she remarked. "It is a *fait accompli.* Ah, see, behold!—the Almighty did never bless me with a daughter; but thou shalt be as a daughter unto me, *ma pauvre; comprenez-vous, Mamzelle* Françoise Dupuis?"

"I understand and I am happy," replied Françoise, and then the four sat down—Jeanne Gérusez, she who used to be *la vipère;* Edmée Leroux, who had always loved and always been cared for; the stout, large Citoyenne herself; and last but by no means least, Françoise Dupuis.

"Listen unto me, Henri, little son," remarked Madame as she wiped big tears from her black eyes. "Listen! hearken! and obey! I would talk with thee later on; but *les chères demoiselles,* they come

first, and thou mayst as well post the letters. There is no mischief in them to-night, I feel well assured; for there is no *cobra* and no *vipère*. Hasten, little son; *vite, vite,* little son; put the letters in the post-box and then return to thy aunt, who is also as a mother unto thee."

Henri, without a word, slung the post-bag on his sturdy back; but as he reached the door, he made the solitary remark:

"It shall be as thou dost wish, little mother; and I will return afterwards for *les demoiselles.*"

"*Vite, vite,* I tell thee, little son," answered Citoyenne; and then the boy left the pretty, snug room, where, night after night, he enjoyed chocolates and gâteaux and tartlets of the best.

When they were quite alone, Citoyenne Pelven spoke some very earnest and at the same time very matter-of-fact words to the three demoiselles who surrounded her.

"Having discovered the real cobra, we will punish her yet," she said; "and the punishment shall take place—ah, but listen, *mes enfants;* it shall take place on the night of the great fête. Leave it altogether in my hands, *mes enfants.* I know what to do and how to do it. Dost thou think, Françoise, thou whom I regarded as *la cobra,* dost thou think that I would let Joyce Selby come to harm? That I would permit Hope Ashley to suffer? No, my little cobra, and *la petite vipère*—I call you both by these names, meaning them not at all. But on the

night of the fête, there will also be the great deliverance. Now, rest easy, *mes enfants.* Citoyenne Pelven has not so long served the great School of La Chapelle for nothing at all. I will not tell to thee, or to thee, or to thee "—here she touched lightly with her pudgy fat finger the hands of the three girls—"I think it best to keep my secret, *mes enfants;* but it is just possible that Henri, my little son, may help. But question him not, chéries. *Attendez-vous, chèries,* leave the matter in my hands."

The girls eagerly promised that they would do so, and then Citoyenne Pelven made a further remark.

"I would bid thee, Françoise Dupuis, the daughter of one who is great and rich in our beloved Paris, to keep thy own counsel. The dress of blue—ah, but I love the blue colour!—it may come in usefully; throw it not away, therefore, *ma petite,* but keep it until the moment comes when I, poor, humble Citoyenne Pelven, *marchande de la pâtisserie,* give unto thee the signal. In the meantime follow the worthy Joyce—for has she not in very truth the eyes of Spain and the heart of England. And keep also, I beseech of thee, Françoise, close, very close to that demoiselle of high degree, Hope Ashley; for she is noble, great in heart. And have nought to do with *la cobra,* the real *cobra, ma petite enfant.*"

The Citoyenne sighed a good deal as she uttered these last words. The three girls sighed with her; but none of them attempted to interfere, being abso-

lutely certain that Citoyenne Pelven knew her own mind, and would not be questioned by anyone.

By and by Henri returned. He looked excited and pleased, and started off at once to take *les demoiselles* to the house of Monsieur Leroux. When the girls found themselves eventually in a large, white bedroom furnished in truly French style, when they had received a warm greeting from Madame Leroux, and when M. Leroux had himself come out and shaken their hands and assured them of a hearty welcome, Françoise turned suddenly to her companions.

"Edmée," she cried; "Jeanne," she continued, "I like your brave Citoyenne; but why must we keep it a secret? Why should we know nothing—nothing at all of what is passing in her mind?"

Edmée gave a short, almost impatient, sigh.

"Thou wilt do well, Françoise," she remarked, "to leave the whole base affair in hands stronger than thine. For thou art but a demoiselle of La Chapelle, and she is a woman of vast sense and power. She will most assuredly do the right thing. Am I not right Jeanne Gérusez?"

"Thou art indeed right," replied Jeanne. "Ah!" she continued, "my heart is like a singing bird tonight."

"Then you trust her absolutely?" replied Francoise.

"Most absolutely, Françoise Dupuis. Do not at-

tempt to interfere or you will make untold mischief."

"I am told," said Françoise after a pause, "that silence is golden. I will therefore keep that golden silence, and will not in very truth open my lips."

The three girls slept comfortably in their snug beds, and although Françoise awoke very early in the morning, and thought of La Chapelle, and thought also of the beautiful new home which her father and *la belle-mère* had provided for her in Paris, she could not but acknowledge that there was a richness, a dignity, a sparkling, dazzling cleanliness, about the home of that girl whom once she had despised—Edmée Leroux.

The girls were not expected back to the School until after they had partaken of coffee and rolls; and such coffee and such rolls and such honey Françoise had never before tasted. They were, in short, like nectar in her mouth; they went down sweetly, causing her heart to sing. Raising her eyes as she helped herself to another piece of honeycomb, she encountered the kindly glance of Madame Leroux. A queer choking came into her throat. For the first time in her whole life it seemed to Françoise that someone gazed at her with a sort of hungry compassion, an all-enduring love. Why should Madame Leroux throw such a strange expression into her brown eyes? Why should she trouble herself to care about the stranger girl? But there was no mistaking that glance, that look, that brief and radiant smile.

Françoise discovered suddenly why Edmée Leroux was so liked in the School. She was her mother's own daughter, not only in feature, which was in itself all that was beautiful and charming, but also in character, in nature. Edmée Leroux inherited her noble qualities from Madame Leroux. No wonder that Françoise felt her poor little frozen miserable semblance of a heart go out to the worthy woman. Madame Leroux seemed to read the expression in the girl's eyes, for she said in her soft, sweet voice:

"Edmée, thou little puss, thou didst not tell to me that thou hadst a friend in the School called Françoise. Françoise—such a name of elegance and beauty; and she is thy friend, my Edmée; *la chère demoiselle* shall often come here from Saturday to Monday if she herself wishes, and if she is not too proud to associate with us of the people."

"Ah, but I also belong to the people," interrupted Françoise; "and I should love to come, that is, if I may."

"Then thou shalt, *mon enfant,* upon next Saturday that ever is. And Jeanne Gérusez shall come also, and we will chatter, chatter, chatter, and talk together of those things that best please the people of France."

"I have one very great friend in the town," said Françoise. "Her name is Citoyenne Pelven. May I see her also, when I come to visit thee, *chère Madame?*"

"But assuredly, *mon enfant.* The good Citoyenne is one of the best; *ah, oui,* of the very best. She has a bad husband, but I speak not of him. She is noble of heart, and that is the best nobility, little Françoise."

It was arranged before the girls returned to the School, which they were obliged to do in time for morning class, that Madame Leroux should write a letter of invitation for her daughter and her daughter's friends, Françoise Dupuis and Jeanne Gérusez, to spend from Saturday to Monday with her in the house in the *rue St. Honoré.*

"She will allow it, *chères enfants,*" said the good Madame; "she will allow it, I feel convinced. And we will have a happy time together. I love to have around me *les jeunes filles; ah, oui,* I love it well."

On their way back to School, Françoise suddenly turned to Edmée and spoke.

"I do not wonder, Edmée Leroux," she said, "that you are loved in the School. With a mother like yours it could not well be otherwise, for you inherit her—her nobility. Ah, bah! I used to think the nobles of France worth cultivating, and those who lived in great houses in England and belonged to the ancient families worth knowing. But if the people are represented by such as thou, Jeanne Gérusez, and such as thou, Edmée Leroux, I join hands, once and forever, with the people. For do they not also include *la bonne Citoyenne* and *la bonne Madame votre mère,* Edmée?"

"Thou hast yet to learn what *mon père* is like," replied Edmée in her strong, low, confiding tone. "Ah, but he is great; he would uphold the cause of the poor and the suffering; of the hungry and the naked. Thou canst not even imagine how much good *mon père* does, Françoise Dupuis. He is rich, but he thinks nothing of his riches, except inasmuch as those riches help him to help others who suffer and who want."

"Then he is like—he is like Joyce Selby," exclaimed Françoise.

"Ah, yes, and I want them to meet," said Edmée, the brightest of bright smiles irradiating her face. "But, *chères demoiselles,* we must hurry or we shall be late for class."

There was no time to add another word. The girls quickly entered the grounds. Three or four minutes later they had taken their accustomed seats in their usual classrooms; and Françoise, suddenly raising her eyes, encountered the fixed gaze of Muriel St. John. She turned away instantly and buried herself in the lessons she was preparing.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FOILED.

Muriel St. John certainly felt the reverse of comfortable. She had, as the proverb relates, fallen between two stools. She was no longer liked by the Comtesse Caterina de Mori; she was no longer endured by Mlle. Juliette de Tournay; she was absolutely cut dead by that atrocious young monster whom she had brought forward in the School—Françoise Dupuis. Françoise was, of course, still a member of *la Société de Joie;* but as far as could be said, she did not take any interest in the said *Société.* Her eyes followed those of Joyce Selby and of Hope Ashley wherever they went and whatever they did. She enjoyed her time immensely at the house of the Leroux's; she confided some of her fears, all, in short, that she dared confide, to Madame Leroux. She was, in every respect, a changed character. She clung to Jeanne Gérusez. Out of *la Société de Joie* she chose Edmée Leroux, although she was no longer a member, as her one and special friend. There was not a single girl in the whole of the Society who did not pity Françoise for the trick played on her by Muriel; and although Muriel did her very utmost to

get Françoise back again to her side, to induce her to establish the old relations between them, she found that Françoise would have nothing whatever to say to her; that those pale, disconcerting blue eyes looked her through and through; that those ignoble features were devoid of expression; that those lips were dumb in her presence. She could not account for this fact; she felt both miserable and anxious; she would have given a great deal to undo the past. But can we, any of us, undo the past? It has gone on before us, that inexorable past, which will stand up and condemn us some day at the Judgment Seat.

Muriel could scarcely think of this, but there is no doubt whatever that a great fear oppressed her. She who had been practically the head of *la Société de Joie* was now less than nobody in their midst. Often at night she wept silently. She was in the position of one who had a great deal to complain about and yet could not complain at all; for each and every member of *la Société* was kind to her—kind without being effusive; kind without being in any sense of the word, friendly. She, of course, as a member of the Committee, as one of the hostesses of the coming fête, took her due place in the summer-house, and gave her counsel when it was asked for; but it was not very often asked for, and a queer and strange thing seemed to have come over her. She found that she was not the Muriel of old. She, who had been full of ideas, who was sparkling, bright, *debonnair,* was now without any ideas. She was not

sparkling, she was not original. However she longed to speak, however much she longed to propound certain views, she discovered to her intense distress that she had nothing to say and no views to propound. She did not dare oppose Joyce Selby nor Hope Ashley nor the Countess Caterina, nor, yet again, the black-eyed Juliette de Tournay. No, she found herself dumb in their midst. They were all quite polite to her; they invariably said:

"You approve of this idea, do you not, Muriel?"

And Muriel found herself forced to say "yes," although she longed to say "no." Suddenly it occurred to her that there was an evil influence working queer, intangible havoc in her brain; and that influence was entirely caused by the light-blue, closely-set eyes of Françoise Dupuis. Françoise herself was very lively; but whenever Muriel attempted to speak, Françoise's curious eyes dashed a quick, serpent-like glance at her, and she found, in spite of herself, that her ideas had flown.

Meanwhile the days went by, the weeks went by. May merged into June, and on the 21st of June the great fête was to be held. It was about this time that there was a secret and great trying-on of dresses; first and foremost the dresses of the hostesses, which turned out to be in their extreme simplicity, in their remarkable elegance, absolutely lovely. They clung round the young figures; they encircled the smooth, young necks; they fell away from the softly-rounded arms; they trailed the prescribed limit on the ground,

but no more. The muslin of these white dresses was of the very softest, and the dresses themselves were lined, except in the transparent bodices and the equally transparent sleeves, with white silk both soft and rich. The elegance of the costume was so apparent that Françoise no longer sighed to wear her pale-blue dress. *La belle mère* had given her something lovely; but the taste of Joyce Selby exceeded the taste of *la belle mère*. Françoise felt that for the sake of Joyce, whom she had learnt passionately to love, she could and would only wear her dress, her simple dress of white. No one had yet seen the badge; it was whispered in the school that no one would see it until the evening of the fête.

Muriel sincerely hoped that long ere that day arrived she would have regained her old composure, have stepped into her old position and been once more the head of *la Société de Joie*. But although the days swept quickly by and the tenth of June arrived, the twelfth of June arrived, the fourteenth, the sixteenth of June arrived, there seemed to be no chance of her recovering the position from which she had fallen. That new blue dress, carefully folded away in one of Françoise's drawers, seemed to stand between her and her peace. What could she do—what *could* she do? Must she go on suffering this torture? Suppose she made up her mind to confess all to Françoise, to entreat her forgiveness, to implore her to be as she had ever been—her great friend, her special friend. Oh, she must do it, she

must! The days were so few between now and the great magnificent fête. On a certain evening which was indeed the seventeenth of June, four days exactly before the great day of the fête itself, a number of girls came out softly into the darkness. They were not perceived by anyone in the house, but Muriel saw them and guessed immediately what they meant and who they were. They were, in short, neither more nor less than her own—her very own fairies—the girls whom she and Caterina had trained; but never, never before had they looked as they did now. They wore the soft gossamer dress which Joyce and Hope had invented for them, this dress which clung closely to their young limbs, which spread itself out at the back like delicate wings, which was of all shades and of all colours; but the shades and the colours were such as must be seen best by the electric stars which shone steady and clear over each young brow. The girls might, in short, be butterflies; they might be fairies; they might be angels. As they flitted by in their new robes, the heart of Muriel beat with savage anger. She could, in fact, scarcely contain herself. The beauty of the scene was unsurpassing. The night was a cloudy one but the fairy dance was a fairy dance in very truth. Hands touched hands, arms intermingled; there was a rapid swift movement, a sort of rushing sound. Muriel felt down deep in her heart that she, with all her cleverness, could never even have dreamt of anything so lovely.

The various lights on the young figures; the flashing gleams which came and went on the happy faces; the sense of rejoicing which seemed to pervade the air as the fairies flew here, flew there, flew everywhere; as their eyes smiled, as their lips smiled, as their white teeth gleamed. Altogether the effect was something to see, to remember, never to forget. And Muriel, as she hid behind a great tree, felt that she might be in it, in the very midst of it; not of course enjoying the dance, but directing it, ministering to its needs; had it not been for her own conduct—her own horrible, low conduct. She clasped her hands tightly together and a faint moan passed her pretty lips.

"I've done for myself," she muttered, but so low were her words that no one heard them. "*La Société de Joie* will go on—yes, it will go on, but I shall be out of it forever and forever." Large tears trickled down her cheeks; then she stood motionless, listening with all her might, listening for all that she was worth. Two girls passed close to her, two girls stood within a foot or two *away;* she knew them well by the tones of their voices. One was Comtesse Caterina, the other was Françoise Dupuis.

"Ah, Comtesse, Comtesse!" murmured the English girl, speaking again in that low, unintelligible tone. "Hast thou indeed forgotten that I was thy friend, thy very great friend? Dost thou cease to remember that a short time, a very short time ago, we were in all respects as one?" The low words

could not reach the ears of Caterina de Mori, and Françoise Dupuis was far too excited even to apprehend the near vicinity of one whom she now regarded as her deadly foe.

"Françoise!" muttered Muriel, "Françoise, whom I raised out of the very dirt. And yet—and yet she is against me; she would injure me if she could; but can she? Am I not still Muriel St. John? Have I not still great power?"

She crept stealthily into the deepest shadow of the old tree, and stood there waiting, longing beyond words to hear, even though what she heard would probably be to her own destruction.

"Well," said Françoise with a deep, very deep sigh, "I never could have imagined anything quite so beautiful, could you, Caterina?"

"Yes, I could," replied Caterina. "I have known Hope Ashley for a long time, and for a short time I have known Joyce Selby. And I am well aware of the fact that they are both geniuses in the art of decoration."

The listening Muriel almost ground her teeth; but she pushed her head a little more forward, careless now, whether she was seen or not. The Comtesse began to talk, and to talk of *her,* of all people.

"Thou didst thyself exhibit very great taste on the day when Joyce was made our Queen," said Caterina, turning to her companion as she spoke. "We would have asked thee to help in the selection of the fairies and in the arranging of their dress,

but under the circumstances, we thought it best not."

"And why 'best not?'" said Françoise, her eyes flashing an angry fire.

"Ah, well," replied Caterina, "I have my reasons. *La Société de Joie* has its reasons. Think not about it again, Françoise; thou hast been a great help to us in our hour of need."

These words soothed Françoise to a certain degree. After a minute, however, she made a remark which raised such a turmoil of anger in the breast of Muriel St. John that she very nearly sprang from her hiding place and declared herself.

"I think," said Françoise, "I think of that little *cat,* Muriel, and what she *might* have done."

"Ah, do not tell me, please," said Caterina. "I would indeed, in very truth rather not know."

"Thou art wonderful, Caterina," exclaimed Françoise; "and I will not indeed speak on those matters which concern thee not. Be thankful that all was discovered in time; be assured of my friendship; be satisfied with my love. I am a happy girl, now, in the School; and the School has nothing whatsoever to fear from Françoise Dupuis, or, truly, from anyone else."

"Ah, *vrai,* truly," muttered Muriel under her breath. "How wisely does the young snake speak; but I may be even with her yet."

The fury within the breast of Muriel was now so great that she was forgetful of all rules, even to the semblance of obedience. She would go her own way,

do what she wished, happen what would. By and by Françoise and Caterina disappeared into the shadowy darkness, and as they did so, Muriel as quickly made up her mind. She rushed into the great central *salle,* where, on these summer evenings, the post was laid ready to be put into the bag for Henri to convey to the post-office. If no girl belonging to the School was present, he, at least, knew where to find the letters. Muriel knew equally well. She caught up a vast pile of letters and, amongst others, saw one addressed to Madame Dupuis; beyond doubt it was written in the scrawly, untidy writing of Françoise Dupuis. In a flash Muriel rushed up to her room. Was it right?—was it wrong? She did not care. She tore the letter open and read the contents. They were, of course, in French, and were as easy to her as the alphabet. "*Chère belle mère,*" the letter began, "I have told unto thee the scandalous conduct of that snake in the grass, Muriel St. John. I have already acquainted thee, *chère belle mère,* with the manner in which she treated me on the day when the dress arrived—the dress, ah, so beautiful, which thou, *ma belle mère,* gavest to thy child. Since that moment my position in this vast School is completely altered. *Les demoiselles* of France and *les demoiselles* of England alike pity me, and alike take very good care to avoid Muriel. That which I thought I might do with Muriel's aid, will not now be attempted; but think not, *ma belle mère,* that Muriel will escape. We have what they call in

England a 'rod in pickle' for that wicked *demoiselle.* Ah, but she will suffer! She deserves it; her beauty will not save her, nor will her rank, for what are these things, *ma belle mère,* compared to the straight and honourable path? Muriel has turned her best friends against her, and she will know it on the night of the fête. Couldst thou not come down, *ma belle mère,* thou and *mon père,* and behold the triumph of thy little Françoise? Couldst thou not at least *try* to come—ah, but it is worth while! Thou wilt rejoice to see what I am thought of, and how little—how *very* little the nobility of mere rank is considered in this School. There is the nobility of the spirit which Joyce Selby and Hope Ashley, my best beloved, think all in all."

Muriel read these words with a choking heart, with a sensation which she could scarcely account for. Then, quick as lightning, she thrust the letter into the deep pocket of her underskirt, and set off to fly through the darkness to the house of Citoyenne Pelven. On her way there she suddenly encountered Henri.

"Henri," she said, "you need not trouble to take the letters to-night to the 'little mother,' for behold! *I* am taking them. I have them here—yes, here."

"Then I will walk with you, mademoiselle," replied Henri, speaking in his most polite voice.

Muriel made no reply, and Henri pursued his favourite song of houp-la, which rang out merrily on the evening breeze. As they approached the little

house in the little street, Muriel suddenly drew up. "I do not want your company," she said. "What I have to say to Madame is for her ears alone."

"*Ah oui, mademoiselle, certainement, mademoiselle,*" answered Henri in that meek little voice which he could assume at will; "I will wait outside until you have had your talk wth Citoyenne Pelven—with the good little mother—and then I will accompany you to the post-office; for it does not do for a *demoiselle* to walk the streets of Tourelle alone in the dark."

"As you please, Henri," replied Muriel. As she spoke, a sudden fit of sneezing overcame her. She thrust her hand into her pocket to extract a handkerchief and, without noticing it herself, pulled out also the letter which had been written by Françoise to *la belle mère.* It flashed white in the darkness; but before Muriel's eyes could light on it, Henri's broad little foot covered it. He said in his meekest tones:

"I will wait your pleasure, *chère demoiselle*"; and Muriel entered the establishment of Citoyenne Pelven. This worthy woman received the young girl with a distinct frown between her black brows, while her equally black eyes flashed in a very ominous manner.

"And what dost thou want with me, mademoiselle?" she asked.

"I would ask," said Muriel, "why our little scheme, *n'est-ce pas,* our little plot, has to all appear-

ance come to grief? You were one with me and with those who belonged to me, Citoyenne. But now you are changed."

"And others are also changed," said the Citoyenne. "Come, Mlle. Muriel St. John, I want not thy presence here. There are certain unholy things which I permit not in my presence. I ask no questions, mademoiselle, I require on thy part no stories to be told; only I would ask thee, mademoiselle, to quit my humble abode. For the things of light have nought to do with the things of darkness."

"What do you mean by the things of light?" asked Muriel, her voice almost choking her.

"I mean this," said Citoyenne. "Thou didst devise an evil plot, mademoiselle, and thou didst take me in and—and others, who belong to the School. But in a good moment, thanks to *le bon Dieu,* thy thoughts were laid bare, thy wicked feeling exposed to view. And now thou wilt go, mademoiselle. *Ah, vite, vite,* wilt thou depart? See, I will put thee out. Thou art *la cobra*—thou, in thy very own person; and I have no dealings with such. *Vite, vite, mademoiselle,* depart or I put thee out, and I am stronger than thou."

In truth there was no doubt on that point, and the next moment Muriel, furious and frightened, found herself outside the door. She had not gained any point, she had not won any victory. But while she was talking, or trying to talk to the Citoyenne, Henri was busily reading from end to end the letter which

Françoise Dupuis had written to her stepmother. It reposed now snugly in his pocket. His spirits were very high.

"You did not talk a long time with the little mother, mademoiselle," he enquired.

"No, and I wish to go home," said Muriel. "The person you call 'the little mother' is a fiend, no less. She does not know how to speak to a lady."

"Shall we convey our letters to the post-office?" asked Henri. And again he gave vent to an irrepressible houp-la!

"No, I don't want to go," replied Muriel.

"But see, mademoiselle, see, I cannot permit you to walk these streets alone, these dark dangerous streets where the poor and the starving and the half-naked and the sick abound. You must come with me, Mademoiselle Muriel St. John. See; it will not take a moment." And Muriel, notwithstanding her passions, her unspeakable rage, found herself obliged to follow Henri as far as the general post-office. He conducted her then to the gates of La Chapelle, and immediately afterwards flew back as fast as his quick feet could carry him to the house of the little mother.

"Ah, my little son," said Citoyenne, "why did that mamzelle come to-night? Why did I miss thine eyes, black as jet, and thy merry laugh and thy cheerful ways? Was it indeed thou, Henri, who made that young scorpion assail me in my private dwelling?"

"No, no, far from that, little mother," replied

Henri. "But behold I have done a good turn. Thou didst not keep her long, little mother!"

"Keep her? I could not abide the sight of her wicked face."

"Ah, but consider, little mother. It was well that she came, and that I—I met her. I was going to La Chapelle for the post, *comprenez-vous?* when I encountered mademoiselle on the high, white road; and mademoiselle, she said, 'I will not require you to come with me to-night, Henri; I have myself secured the letters, and I want to speak to Citoyenne Pelven.' I said that I would accompany her, and she made no answer, only she walked *très vite, très vite.* As we got outside thy *maison,* little mother, the light from the moon was hidden, and behold! it was dark. And mademoiselle, the good God made mademoiselle to sneeze, and she put her hand into her pocket to draw out her *mouchoir;* and because of the darkness she did not see what came also with the *mouchoir.* It was a letter, little mother, and it flashed white just for half a quarter of a second. But my foot was on it—my small square foot, that thou dost laugh at me for possessing, little mother—almost before it reached the ground. When she went to thee, and thou didst not keep her long—*ah, non, non*—I placed myself under the light of a street lamp and I read the contents of the letter. Here, Citoyenne, here, little mother *chèrie,* we have plenty—ah, plenty in these words to convict the English maiden. Read for thyself, Citoyenne, for she opened

the letter and its contents are no longer unknown; and she dares not interfere. Read and consider what is best to be done. She has fallen into our trap, *la petite mademoiselle;* we do right to read the letter. See, little mother, *vite, vite.* Ah, but my heart is as light as a feather! The thing is as plain now as any trap set for any bird. She meant to ruin another, but that other will ruin her."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE GREAT FÊTE

It had come at last—the day of the great, the very great fête; and the weather rose nobly to the occasion. The sun shone, the birds sang, the cherries were ripe on the trees. Behold, it was but to stand under them, and they dropped into your mouth—delicious as no English cherries ever are; soft, melting, crimson. Ah, but they were good to eat, and as the day was a universal holiday, many and various were the young lips stained with cherry juice, and many and varied were the tones of keen young laughter, for happiness reigned supreme in the great School. Were not the girls going to have the time of their life?—so they expressed it. Were they not going on that very evening to do honour to that most gracious lady, Madame la Comtesse? Was not the marquee already placed in the most suitable part of the grounds? Were not the six tents further erected at a good distance from each other, but all with a distinct purpose in view? And was not Joyce almost beside herself with delight? And was not Hope happy of the happy—following and helping her friend?

The tent especially set apart for Madame La Comtesse de Trés was lined within with rich, soft, crimson silk. Had it not its chair—soft, luxurious—its little table; its ventilators, which were kept regularly swaying backwards and forwards in the summer breeze? The girls who had special charge of this tent were Joyce Selby and Hope Ashley. The other tents were attended to by different hostesses; and the girls of the School, just because they were girls of the School of La Chapelle, were to attend to the refreshments. It would be warm enough at seven in the evening on this, the longest day of the year; and Madame would be conducted to her tent, to her throne, by those twelve maidens who formed the choir of *La Société de Joie*. It was only those special demoiselles who were absolutely in the heart of the secret, who knew that these girls had long been trained for this special and admirable work; but never, never before did they sing as they meant to sing to-day, when Joyce and Hope and Françoise and Juliette de Tournay had all helped them.

Meanwhile a girl was seen flitting backwards and forwards like a restless, most restless being, in the very midst of all the preparations. This girl was Muriel St. John, and she was as unhappy as any girl could be, because she could not find the letter that she had stowed away for absolute safety in the deep pocket of her inner skirt. She had not thought of it again until the following morning, and then, behold! it was gone. She dared not question the

maids about it; she dared not make enquiries, unless, indeed, Henri knew something. She hated and feared and detested Henri now, but he might know something. Muriel felt in an agony of terror. If that letter had been dropped, if it had been discovered, all was indeed up with her. Much as she loathed Henri, she felt that she must confide in him. She put off doing so until the morning of the fête. She endured her misery as best she could, during the intervening days. But on the morning of the fête she felt certain she could hold herself in no longer.

Henri *was* Henri. Henri had met her and accompanied her to the door of the house of la Citoyenne; Henri for his own sake would not tell that she was going there. He might possibly know something about the letter. It was hateful to have to ask him, but she felt that she must.

Now, the page-boy was particularly busy on this glorious summer's day. He did not know, as he himself expressed it, whether he was on his head or his heels. He only knew that he was required to be here, there and everywhere. He was to help *les demoiselles* with their various arrangements. He was to catch the bright smile which hovered round Hope's sweet mouth. He was to rejoice in the goodwill with which Joyce Selby addressed him. Ah, yes, ah, yes, Henri was a very important person. In the midst of his busiest moment he rushed full up against Muriel.

"I must speak to you for one moment," she said. "I have lost a letter; have you found one?"

"A letter for yourself, mademoiselle?"

"No—yes—yes—*no,* a letter, that is sufficient."

"I am afraid I cannot tell you anything about it, mademoiselle. *Ah, oui,* Mademoiselle Hope, I am coming, coming."

He dashed up, holding a tray full of glasses, which he was most careful not to spill.

Muriel St. John felt a strange, unaccountable sinking at her heart. She could not exactly tell what brought it there, and yet she knew well, ah, very well, its cause. Beyond doubt Henri *did* know something about the letter. He had told no lie, it is true, but neither had he spoken the truth. He had, in his clever way, avoided the subject; passed it, so to speak, by; let it alone as though it did not exist. What was Muriel to him? What was her lost letter to him? Was he not *un enfant du peuple?* Was she not, the said Muriel, a grand lady—proud, very proud of England? What did Henri care about England and its grandeur and its falsehood. *Ah, oui, certainement,* it was false, this England, about which so much had been written, so much spoken. The people of England could tell lies; *mais certainement* they could; but he, the little French boy, would circumvent them yet. He chuckled to himself, then hurried to obey the call of Hope Ashley. He was wanted, he was important, he was expected to be here, there and everywhere. Suddenly, however, it

flashed through his active little brain that, although Françoise, a native of his own beloved country, could stoop to the great untruth, the untruth so palpable, so real; yet Hope Ashley—Hope Ashley with the smile which was to the little page-boy as the smile of God Himself—would never, *never* stoop to tell a lie; nor would her beloved friend, Joyce Selby—she, that noble mademoiselle who was so very rich and who was giving the fête. Henri felt his head reel with a passionate desire to help these two demoiselles, and to cause Françoise, even though she did belong to his country, to suffer the full fruits of her undoing—Françoise *and* Muriel—demoiselles from England and France.

A great change had come over Henri during the last few days. He himself at one time had thought Françoise Dupuis, and other girls belonging to the School, charming, picturesque, even delightful in their wonderful daring—their determination to expose what they chose to consider false; but all these things had passed away from the brain and the mind of Henri. Was it the sudden, sweet smile of Hope; was it the radiant look of happiness on Joyce's lovely face; or was it because both Edmée Leroux and Jeanne Gérusez belonged to him, were of his people, and could not, would not, do a mean and shabby thing? He was a little startled in the midst of those musings, which came very fast through his quick little brain, by Hope's gentle, high-bred voice.

"Henri, I've a word to say to you, *mon garçon,*" remarked Hope Ashley.

"Ah, *oui, mademoiselle, certainement, mademoiselle,*" answered the French boy.

Hope suddenly and by a direct movement turned herself round so that she herself was under the shadow of a great tree, while Henri Sarci's little face was lit up by the beams of the sun. Henri made a sort of impatient movement. He wanted to get out of the sunlight; he wanted to get away from the fixed gaze of that noble young English mademoiselle, whom in his heart of hearts he worshipped.

"No, Henri, stay where you are, *mon garçon,*" said Hope. "I wish now to say a few words to you."

"*Peut-être* you mean to-night," remarked the French boy.

"No, no, I mean now," answered Hope. "To-night may possibly be too late."

Henri kicked his square little foot about on the gravel; then he put his large tray of glasses down on a sheltered part of the lawn and stood at attention.

"I wish to say this," continued Hope, "and I know my good little Henri, you will do precisely what I wish, and what my dearest friend, Joyce Selby, also wishes. You have a plot in your head, little Henri, which it is your intention to bring to perfection this night, yes, this night."

"Ah, and why not, mademoiselle?" said Henri.

He raised his black eyes for a moment, encountered that winning, truthful smile, and then looked on the grass where his tray full of glittering glasses of all sorts and sizes, reposed.

"I heard you just now talking for a brief moment to one of my friends, Muriel St. John," continued Hope. "I think—in fact I am nearly sure—that you have a very, very strong reason for not liking my friend, Muriel; and your intention is to take the part of the *revenger*. In the midst of our fête, of our gaiety, of our fun, you, Henri, will willfully spoil all; you, with the help of my other dear friend, Citoyenne Pelven. Henri, I've suspected this for some days; but now I am sure, certain, positive. Accordingly, I wish now to make a request to you, Henri; and that request of mine you are to repeat with your own lips to that good, that excellent woman, Citoyenne Pelven. Neither Joyce nor I wish that any cloud should come over the proceedings of her fête. We wish all to go happily and well."

"But, mademoiselle, you do not know. *Vous ne comprenez pas.*"

"Perhaps I do not know, perhaps I am wrong. But let that matter pass, Henri; and to-night, from seven to twelve o'clock, be on the side of the good and the brave. Keep the ball rolling. Add to the fun, do not diminish from it. Your good aunt, Citoyenne Pelven, will be present also. Tell her most carefully what I say. She is, yes, she is of the

best of the earth. I ask no questions, Henri, but to-night I do not want any cloud to come between us and our happiness; for happiness is a great and a blessed thing, and it is more than cruel, it is worse than unkind, to take that happiness and fling it, yes, fling it in the faces of those who would otherwise be happy—yes, happy. Do you promise, Henri? Will you do what I ask?"

"Ah, mademoiselle, who could refuse you? It hurts me sore but I *will* promise. Only to-morrow, mademoiselle, to-morrow I may have my way."

"To-morrow you may have your way if you still wish for it, Henri. And now please put those glasses carefully in their places in the marquee, and then go to visit Citoyenne Pelven and tell her what I have said to you. Tell her that at any cost there must be no disturbance to-night. Do you understand, little Henri?"

"*Ah, oui, mademoiselle, ah, oui.*"

Henri stooped, picked up his heavy tray of glasses, and hoisted it deftly, without the slightest trouble, on one arm. With the disengaged arm he gently touched his left foot.

"Observe, mademoiselle," he said, "that my feet, although short, are *broad.* I will act as you do wish, Mademoiselle Hope Ashley"; and then he disappeared into the tent.

About ten minutes later, to the great amazement of the Citoyenne, "little son" was paying her a visit

in the narrow and crooked *rue* where she kept her *pâtisserie.*

"There is mischief, little mother," he said; "and we, you and I, must obey."

"And what is that mischief, little son?" asked the Citoyenne. "Is not this the glorious day of the great fête, and the *chocolats* rising as they never rose before, and the *gâteaux* light as a feather, and the *sirops—ah, mais oui,* never did I taste *sirops* like those which will be brought in pails by my very own hands into the marquée to-night. What can be wrong, little son?—for of a surety the sun in the Heavens shines brightly, and the good God is over everything. *Ah oui,* little son, over everything is the good God! Hast thou found another snake in the grass—a scorpion *peut-être,* a rattle-snake *peut-être?*"

"*Non, non,* none of these things," replied Henri; "all is well, and there are no fresh snakes in the grass. But alas, alas! little mother. Although thou hast kept the letter, ah, so safely, and the plot is assuredly ours, and the mischief is done and cannot be undone, yet, behold! little mother, consider! Mademoiselle Hope, she says, she says—'Henri, *no.*' She looks me full in the face and she says the one *parole* 'no.' She says that she has her suspicions; and that nothing, nothing at all shall be done to-night to spoil the flavour, the full delicious flavour of thy *gâteaux,* Citoyenne; of thy *sirops;* of thy tartlets. That to-night the fête shall be a fête indeed;

and no dark words are to be spoken and no black and ugly deeds mentioned. To-morrow—ah, to-morrow we may do our best, *or* our worst. She commands, and I—I have promised, and I must obey; and thou must promise, little mother, for am I not thy little son?"

"It is that blessed demoiselle, Hope Ashley, that thou dost speak about?" said Citoyenne Pelven, pushing aside the black hair from her flushed face. "Ah, well, well, perhaps she is right. She sees further into the mysteries of the holy religion than we do. We must obey her. For my part I am glad not to spoil the fête; and to-morrow, little son, is not far off."

"*Non, non, Citoyenne,*" cried the boy. "Houp-la! Houp-la! And think, consider, little mother, that I am to wear a dress of pale-blue velvet, as the one and only boy on the premises; and that thou wilt come with all the grandeur of thy purple gown with its ornaments of silver. For thou art to attend all night, watching and looking on, watching, helping, and looking on, by orders of Mademoiselle Joyce Selby. I shall be very busy all day, Citoyenne; but in the evening I will bring my pale-blue velvet suit for thee to arrange upon my person. And my little flat foot which did such service will be encased in blue shoes of the finest kid; and my little legs in stockings of the finest silk; and all—all to match, so that, little mother, thou wilt be proud of thy little son. I shall be with thee not later than six, so be

dressed thyself, little mother, to get me into my finery, which I will bring—I will bring with me. Ah, but *c'est vrai,* it is houp-la, houp-la!"

The boy disappeared out of the shop door. Citoyenne Lafarge saw him as he passed, and longed to call to him to come to her; but before she could utter a word, he was gone like a flash. Why should Citoyenne Pelven have all the luck? thought Citoyenne Lafarge. She grumbled, and a cross look came over her freckled face; and her ugly eyes and scanty red hair and thin bony person made her the very reverse of inviting to those who looked at her, as she stood in the doorway of her dirty shop. Why, indeed, should Citoyenne Pelven, with the black eyes and the broad, stout figure, have all the luck, even to the friendship of that page-boy, Henri, whom she distinctly heard her call her "little son"? Madame Lafarge had many children of her own—all thin and red-haired and bony like herself; and she found them a trouble, not a joy. But just then a piping voice asked for three sous' worth of *sirop,* and another piping voice demanded three sous' worth of *eau sucrée,* and she had to turn back into the dirty shop, still muttering and discontented, and still envying Citoyenne Pelven.

Meanwhile, Hope, having issued her mandate to Henri, went swiftly, but with a great deal of determination in her walk, along the grounds. After a long time she came across the object of her search. This was no less a person than Muriel St. John, who

was leaning up against the plantation fence which divided the grounds of La Chapelle from the high road that led to the town of Tourelle. Muriel was driven at that moment to absolute despair. She knew to a certainty that Henri was aware of the fate of the letter—the terrible letter which she had stolen from the other letters; which she had secured for herself, had boldly opened, and had read the full contents thereof. With that letter in her possession she might have been armed to save herself from the very worst of it; but without it she was lost, ruined. With it she could persuade Françoise—for the sake of Françoise herself—to hold her peace, to say nothing, to do nothing. But if the letter was lost, and if it was in the hands of her enemies—as she could not but consider Citoyenne Pelven and Henri—she was indeed and most absolutely in their power. They could prove beyond doubt that she had stolen a letter addressed to someone else, from the collection of letters waiting for the post. She had been disgraced already, but what was all former disgrace compared to this? Her heart sank within her. She wondered if she could fly—fly from the School of La Chapelle; get back to England. She could not do this without money, however, and she had not any money. She was at the present moment most strangely and terribly disliked in the School; she dared not ask a girl or a mistress, she dared not ask a single person, to lend her a sufficient sum to take her, even travelling third class, back to her home. Besides, the mere

fact of her demanding money on the day of the fête, would, in itself, rouse the very worst suspicions against her. No, she must stay and endure it; she must endure the worst, the very worst. It was just at that moment, while her thoughts were raging within her, and her head was aching as though she were suffering from a sunstroke, that a hand, gentle, firm, and withal very tender, was laid on her shoulder. She turned abruptly and met the clear, calm, affectionate gaze of those greeny-brown eyes which were Hope Ashley's special prerogative; which no other girl in the school possessed; which belonged to Hope and to Hope alone; and which made Hope, in consequence, someone at once to fear and to love. Ah, ah! there had been a time when she and Hope Ashley had been friends, very close friends. Then there had come a time when she, Muriel St. John, had deliberately and without thought of the cruel mischief she was effecting, taken from Hope her own friendship, the friendship of la Comtesse Caterina, and of one or two other girls who belonged to the School. These girls were all members of *la Société de Joie.* Because Hope did not think it right to join, and therefore would not join, she had lost her friends. Not that, after all, she greatly minded this loss, but beyond doubt such was the reason.

Muriel discovered at the present moment, as she looked fully into those earnest, truthful eyes, what a huge mistake she had made in giving up one like Hope Ashley. There was something in Hope's pres-

ent expression which smote her to the very heart, which made her tremble from head to foot, which caused a wild daring idea to rush through her brain.

"Ah, Hope, ah, Hope!" she exclaimed, "have you found me and can you—will you help me? It will cost exactly two pounds for me to get home—home to my beautiful home in Cornwall. Will you lend me the money, Hope, for the sake of the friendship which we used to have with each other; for the sake of the old times, the good old times? Oh, Hope, oh, Hope, I am *so* miserable."

"I know it, Muriel," replied Hope, in her gentle, very tender voice, "and I am most bitterly sorry for you."

"*You* sorry for me? *You—You?*"

"Yes, I am bitterly sorry for you," remarked Hope.

"Then you will let me have the money? You will; you must!"

"If Madame la Comtesse de Très gives me permission, I will lend it to you tomorrow, Muriel," said Hope in her gentle, clear voice—that voice which was sweeter than a singing-bird's.

Muriel stamped her foot impatiently. "And what good will that do?" she said. "I want it to-night, yes, to-night; before the fête. It is the fête that I dread; it is the exposure that I shrink from—the certain, the certain exposure."

"You cannot have any money from me to-day," answered Hope. "No, not a halfpenny. You have

sown the wind and you are reaping the whirlwind. Poor Muriel! Poor, dear Muriel!"

"Oh, how can you talk to me like that?" cried Muriel, "when you are deliberately giving me over to despair."

"I am not giving you over to despair," said Hope. "And now please listen, Muriel. I searched for you until I found you. I found you here, and I had—ah, well, never mind; I will not talk about my suspicions. You are, I can see, very much afraid of the fête which will take place to-night. You dread the appearance of certain people at the fête who may possibly—I say *possibly*—effect your ruin in the School. Now I wish to tell you something, Muriel. I shall, at midnight, get the permission of Madame la Comtesse de Trés to have a little talk with you all alone, quite by ourselves, in the honeysuckle arbour which belongs to the rose garden. And I have taken steps to secure you against all uneasiness, against every possible sort of misery between now and the hour named. Meet me in the honeysuckle bower at twelve o'clock to-night, and until that time rest easy, for nothing *can* happen to you, nothing *will* happen to you. I—I have taken steps. Joyce has taken steps. Try to be your old self, Muriel St. John. Help others; be bright, be gay, and wait for me, *whatever* happens, in the honeysuckle bower, on the stroke of midnight this very night."

"But—but—" said Muriel, trembling violently, "is this indeed true?"

"It is absolutely true."

"But are you coming with others—with others whom I dread?"

"I'm coming alone, Muriel. Now cheer up. Nothing, nothing in the world must spoil the fête of Joyce Selby."

CHAPTER XXV.

A TUNE OF JOY.

EVERYTHING was in perfect readiness. The hostesses were wearing their white dresses. Different tents were each occupied by a hostess, with the single exception of the larger tent, which was in possession of two hostesses, Hope Ashley and Joyce Selby. The hostesses were wearing their badges. The secret of the badge was out at last. It was simply a little word which spelt *Joyce*. It was made in the form of a crescent and hung suspended from a narrow gold chain, which was clasped round the neck of each hostess. The word "Joyce" shone out distinctly in its mingling of real turquoise and real diamonds. It was a very beautiful gift, and gave the final touch of light to each young figure. It rested on the bosoms of the dresses, sometimes the wonderful blue of the turquoise perdominating, sometimes the flashing light on the diamonds being most vividly seen. Joyce had spared neither expense nor thought over her gift to each young hostess. There was to be nothing shabby in connection with the fête; and as she moved about, now here, now there, glancing into the great marquee, which was simply laden with refreshments, and which was attended to by Muriel St. John—

yes, marvellous to relate, Muriel St. John herself, Citoyenne Pelven, Henri Sarci, and a number of girls of the School—she felt certain that all was going well.

In the very far distance she also heard, just then, the sound of music—music, very soft, very telling, very inspiriting.

Joyce immediately flew in the direction of her own special tent, where Hope Ashley awaited her.

"All is well, all is of the very best," she whispered. "How have you managed this wonderful matter, Hope?—for manage it of course you did, no one else could. Muriel St. John is in the Marquée, and enjoying herself with the best."

Hope gave one of her sudden, flashing smiles, caught Joyce's hand, but said nothing.

The music—that music caused by the sweetest, most harmonious singing—came nearer; then a tall, very stately lady, in rich grey satin of a pearly grey embroidered all over with seed pearls, appeared in view. She walked very slowly, with a dignity all her own. She was the great Comtesse de Trés.

Surrounding her to right, to left, before, behind, came as slowly the soft-voiced singers.

These were the words that floated out on the pleasant evening air:

Come shine, come rain,
Come joy, come pain—
To us comes pleasure
In fullest measure.

Why should we meet pain on this summer's night,
This night of June, with joy at its height?
  Are not the roses in their fullest flowers?
  Do not the honeysuckles scent our bowers?
Chère Madame, behold! we greet!
We press close, we fall at your feet.
  We are yours to the end of our story;
  We are yours to surround you with glory."

The sweet voices so distant at first—almost like an echo—came closer and nearer. In the midst of the summer evening the young people themselves would not make an unfit representation of white-robed angels. The Comtesse at their head—the Comtesse in their midst felt a strange lump rise in her throat. She had not lived in vain—these *chères demoiselles,* these beloved children of her heart! The Comtesse de Trés had all the passionate nature of the true Frenchwoman, and at the present moment she could have clasped these young creatures to her breast, assuring them of her deep and undying love. The music in itself was beautiful; the words, simple of the simple, exactly suited the exquisite tune. It came nearer and yet nearer—that sound of perfect melody. But the young choir were well trained, and as they approached the entrance of the tent, they, as it were, instinctively lowered their voices, making them sound at once small and faint, like the song of the nightingale—that bird of night—and the clear echo of the lark—that bird of the morning. Every girl in the School stood transfixed—to listen, to admire, to adore. The girls themselves were as nothing to

these other girls; it was Madame la Comtesse who was at that moment all in all. Presently she reached the tent where Joyce and Hope waited to receive her. They wore their white Watteau dresses; they wore their beautiful crescents of diamonds and turquoises. The face of Joyce was very slightly flushed; Hope, on the contrary, looked paler than her wont; but she was filled with a great sense of rejoicing. The singing ceased. It was meant to cease as the great guest of the evening entered her really beautiful tent. The young choir mingled with the rest of the girls, took their part with the others, laughed with glee, were full of mirth to their finger-tips. But just at that very moment when their part, important as it was, had come to an end, Joyce stepped forward. She conducted the Queen of the occasion, the great Comtesse de Trés, to her comfortable, indeed luxurious seat; and then kneeling before her, presented her with a beautifully-made morocco case.

"This is from your children, *chère Madame,*" she exclaimed. "The children whom you have taught to love you—the children who do love you. You will accept our little gift just because I think—I *think*—" her voice faltered, she glanced at Hope.

"Because it means the essence of love itself," interposed Hope.

"Yes," continued Joyce, "it *is* the very essence of love—love that cannot die, love that must accompany you, *chère Madame,* all through your life; the

love of your children for their principal, for their teacher, for their head."

Madame la Comtesse, who had been trembling not a little as she approached the beautifully arranged tent; trembling not a little because of the words sung by the young choir, and because of the sentiment in those words; now felt herself trembling far more than ever.

"Open the case, Joyce, my child," she said. "I am—yes, I am—overcome." Tears filled her eyes, a choking sensation rose in her throat. She longed, beyond anything in all the world, to clasp those two beautiful girls to her heart. She knew, although she never breathed a word, that the expense of the entertainment was Joyce's; but that most of the thoughts were Hope's—Hope and Joyce, two English maids. Ah, had she not indeed won a victory!—when girls from the cold land of England could woo her so gently, so sweetly, so absolutely, as did these two.

Joyce spoke in a rather quick, somewhat husky voice.

"This is the gift of the entire School," she said. "There are at the present moment ninety-two pupils in your school, *chère Madame;* and all—yes *all,* both English and French, have given something."

"English, French, Italian and German," interrupted Hope again.

"Ah, yes," said Madame, "I must on no account forget my Italian darlings, Imelda and Gemma. Of

all the sweet girls in this School, there are none sweeter than they."

"Thou art right, *chère Madame,*" said Hope again; "and they have done their part right nobly. See, behold! the thing is good. Open it, Joyce, and do not keep our beloved Madame any longer in suspense."

Instantly Joyce pressed a spring. The little dark-blue morocco case flew open at her touch; and within lay a tiara—beautiful beyond words, and composed almost entirely of diamonds of the very first water. At each end, however, was a very large turquoise of a brilliant and dazzling turquoise blue. This turquoise was set round with pearls, minute seed pearls, which would exactly suit the dove-coloured dress which Madame was wearing for the occasion.

"May I myself have the great honour of placing it on your head, Madame la Comtesse?" exclaimed Joyce.

"Thou mayest, my beloved child. Ah, but it is beautiful! It is dazzling! Ah, my new child, Joyce, thou hast paid too heavily for this lovely bauble."

"No, no, thou dost mistake, *chère Madame,*" exclaimed Joyce. "We have all paid our share, have we not, Hope?"

"Yes, all; yes, all," exclaimed Hope.

The tiara was immediately placed on the dark head of Madame la Comtesse. The diamonds glittered and shone, the pearls softened the almost dazzling

effect. The turquoises looked tenderly, gracefully blue at each end of the beautiful tiara.

"The gift is too great," said Madame.

"But thou wilt accept it, Madame, *chère Madame?*" said Joyce in a voice which was suddenly filled with a sort of agony of fear.

"I have said so," replied Madame; and she took Joyce's sweet little hand in hers. "I accept this wonderful and precious gift from my children. Hope is right when she calls it the essence of love. In that spirit, I accept what is far too valuable to be taken by me in any other spirit. But now, my children, my beloved ones, before I go out to show myself to the rest of the School, and to proffer my thanks to the rest of the School, I would ask one gift from thee, my Joyce, and from thee, my Hope."

"Anything in our power," said both at once.

"It is," said Madame, speaking gently and firmly, "that you both kiss me, and allow me to kiss you in return."

Was there ever surely a moment like the present? The girls' trembling kisses were met by tears, large as crystals, which fell from the eyes of Madame la Comtesse. She folded her arms round each young figure; she pressed each girl for a moment to her breast. Then she said:

"God keep thee, God love thee," and sank back in her chair, as though she were altogether overcome by her emotion.

Hope whispered something to Joyce, and Joyce

vanished immediately from the tent. When they were quite alone, Madame spoke.

"Hope," she said, just touching the tiara, "has Joyce ruined herself over this?"

"*Chère Madame, non, certainement non,*" replied Hope. "Fret not thy dear heart, beloved Madame. Joyce would not do anything mean like that. Consider, Madame, thy vast School—ninety-two girls. If the poorest give a little, if the richest give a good deal, the tiara can be purchased without anyone in particular being mentioned, being thought of, being in any single way inconvenienced. Ah, will you not believe me, *chère Madame?* And the pleasure! Think of the pleasure! This is Joyce's fête. Do not let a cloud come over it. Let it be brilliant all the time. Show how you do return our love, *chère Madame;* show to all the girls of La Chapelle how you do value our love, our worship, our little gift."

"Thanks to thee, Hope; thou hast eased my heart," said Madame.

Just at that moment Joyce herself appeared, bearing a small tray of refreshments. There was a tiny bottle of the very best champagne, which held a single glass, no more and no less. Joyce had sent for it to Paris, and it fizzed and foamed now as the Mistress, overcome by all this courtesy and love and adoration, raised it to her lips.

"There is *sirop* for the rest of us," said Hope; "but this is for thee, Madame, beloved."

Madame la Comtesse de Trés sipped the sparkling

wine, ate a few mouthfuls of the refreshments, and then her courage having altogether returned to her, said she would rest for a short time alone in the tent until the girls had all partaken of their refreshments, when she would meet them on the front lawn, with the intention of saying a few words to them.

Hope immediately took Joyce's hand, bore away the tray of refreshments, and entered the marquee which was now full of girls—all eating, chattering, laughing, enjoying their *sirop,* the like of which they surely never tasted before; and, in short, having a very good time. The appearance of Hope and Joyce in their midst caused the laughter to stop for a little; and some eyes full of curiosity, some again full of intense delight, one pair, alas! filled with a nameless fear—all looked at the two girls as they entered, arm in arm.

Before, however, one word could be spoken, Citoyenne Pelven came to the fore.

"I will take the command on this occasion," she remarked. "I am a woman of the people, *n'est ce pas?* Nevertheless I take the command. For you, *chères demoiselles,* must eat, must drink, before you utter a word. Restrain your impatience, *mes enfants;* the good God likes the patient spirit. Henri, little son, prepare the very best refreshments —those that I told thee to put aside for Mlle. Joyce and Mlle. Hope."

There was something, altogether, about the Citoyenne in her purple dress with its silver ornaments,

which caused the girls to cease to regard her as in any way beneath them. They stood in groups and looked on, until at last, at a word from the Citoyenne, Edmée Leroux, Jeanne Gérusez, Juliette de Tournay, and one or two more, whispered a word in the good woman's ear.

"*Oui, oui,*" she replied, "*ah oui, certainement oui;*" and then as though by magic the marquee, which was nearly stifling, became half empty, and the girls above named took their positions in front of their several tents. Here were to be seen the tent of the fortune-teller, the tent of the Punch and Judy, the tent of the pretty demoiselle who played the violin, and other tents besides. Each tent was erected with an object, and the object of each tent was to add its happiness to the lovely fête.

"But the tents will not be declared open till half-past eight," exclaimed Edmée Leroux. "I shall then disappear, and lo! in my stead there will be a fortune-teller. Ask me not how, ask me not why."

"And in my tent there will be a game which is a profound secret until those who enter behold it," said Jeanne Gérusez. "But no tents can be opened until half-past eight. For Madame la Comtesse has something to say to us all."

Ah, ah, how the sun did shine! How it shone towards its setting! What a softened glow there was over everything; and strange, miraculous as it seemed, Muriel was out of nothing. She was even invited to join in a great secret, which she and Fran-

çoise were to conduct together in one of the tents. But it wanted a long time yet before half-past eight of the clock.

Meanwhile Joyce and Hope drank *sirop*—so good, so delicious, so perfectly iced, so absolutely refreshing, that their thirst was assuaged; and although at the crucial moment they had felt very nearly breaking down, their spirits now revived. They ate, they drank, they were merry once again.

"You have tired yourselves out, *petites*," cried the good Citoyenne. "Bring the *pâté de foie gras*, little son; bring it quickly, ah, quickly. Seest thou not how thy young mistresses all but faint with their exertions."

But the said young mistresses were now very far from fainting. Henri looked perfectly elegant in his dress of pale-blue velvet, and over and over again he pointed with a significant glance to his short square foot.

"But trust me, Mlle. Hope," he exclaimed; "I am Henri, of the true heart. I keep my word—ah, verily, *chère mademoiselle*."

Hope gave him one of her smiles. She then stood up, approached Citoyenne Pelven and kissed her on her brow.

"Thy little son might be a prince of the royal blood," she exclaimed. "Thou doest well to be proud of him; that thou doest, Citoyenne."

"Ah, but—ah, but—art thou not of the very dearest?" she cried. "I could weep with joy on this

happy night. Thou didst right, Mlle. Hope—there ought to be no unkind thoughts nor unkind deeds on this night of happiness."

"You see I was right," said Hope. "And now, please, Citoyenne, collect the School; for I think our gracious Madame la Comtesse would like to see them all surrounding her on the front lawn."

Everything had been arranged with such absolute order beforehand that nothing was likely to go wrong now; and when Hope and Joyce entered the large tent reserved for the reception of Madame, they found that gracious and beautiful woman quite herself again, and waiting to receive them. The night was beginning to fall at last, only the twilight, it is true, still lingered. But that very twilight brought out the stateliness of her noble figure, and caused the diamonds to flash round her brow. It was also, strange to say, sufficiently light for the great turquoises, so enormous in size, to show distinctly against her black hair. As Madame la Comtesse de Trés stepped out on the front lawn, the girls of the School were seen hurrying to meet her. They came from right, from left; they came from all quarters. But there was no confusion of any sort in the manner of their arrival; and Madame la Comtesse felt no shock of surprise, when, out of her ninety-two pupils, twelve young maidens in perfect white singled themselves out to surround her; singled themselves out also to sing the final refrain of their little song of welcome.

Chère Madame, behold! we greet!
We press close; we fall at your feet.
We are yours to the end of our story;
We are yours to surround you with glory.

"We are yours, we are yours," echoed from far away.

Then the white-robed maidens took up the refrain:

We are yours to the end of our story;
We are yours to surround you with glory.

Immediately after the singing of the last words, there came a profound stillness—the sort of stillness which might be felt.

Madame la Comtesse de Trés slowly, and with the utmost dignity, raised her right hand and touched the lovely diadem that shone on her raven-black hair.

"I have to thank you, my children; I do with my whole heart—from the bottom of my heart. I thank you, my children; I love you. Words cannot express more than perfect love, and that is mine for you, *mes petites enfants.* And now—" her voice changed —"this is the hour of pleasure. Let us be happy while we may; enjoy yourselves, my children; Heaven bless you, my children."

It was at that instant that the five little tents were declared to be open. The girls flew away to have their fortunes told, to witness the undying Punch and Judy show (which wanders through Europe). Secrets, nothing in themselves, were revealed in other

tents. Joy and laughter were most truly the order of the hour. But—but the sun had set; the last gleam of the gloaming had passed. The sky was dotted with innumerable stars, the moon came slowly up amongst the trees; and at a word from the Citoyenne, who was invaluable on this occasion, the fairies appeared and began their mystic and wonderful dance. Never, never before had they danced as they did now. Excitement filled their veins, joy stimulated their hearts. The tiny electric lamps on each little head showed their approach, also showed their disappearance. In a certain grove a fairy might be seen—might be seen for a flash, only to vanish. In a certain arbour a fairy peeped out; in another arbour three or four fairies met and touched hands. Then the dance, indescribable and graceful, came into full swing. It was stately with the stateliness of the old minuet; it was brisk with the briskness of the present day waltz; hands touched hands, arms twined round other arms. The little figures were seen here, there, everywhere. Madame looked on with delight. She was altogether taken by surprise—surprise impossible to describe; surprise which could not find proper vent in speech.

"But—but this is wonderful," she said at last to Joyce. "This is overpowering. Who has taught them this strange and marvellous thing? I thought I knew my children; but I did not know my fairies! This fête is altogether too ravishing, *chérie*—it melts the very heart. But hearken, *chèries,* beloved. Why

should only the fairies dance? Why should not we all—yes, all; old and young—dance?—on the night of the fête of Joyce Selby. Citoyenne Pelven, I select thee as *my* partner. I feel young again, I am no longer old. My children have made me young; my fairies have given to me perpetual youth. Come, Citoyenne, dance with me if thou wilt."

That was indeed a sight to behold. The pretty, white-robed choir sang all the music of the dance. They sang without pause, without hindrance, and it may truly be said that there was not a girl present who did not, to her very heart's core, enjoy this final event in the great fête of Joyce Selby. What was to happen next? There was only one girl miserable; and it seemed to her, as she danced with the others—for no one treated her coldly on this night of nights—that all that had happened lately must have been as a dream. Joyce delighted the heart of Henri by selecting him as her partner. The dances continued until twelve solemn strokes sounded from the stable clock. The fête was at an end.

Muriel hurried to the honeysuckle bower. The rest of the girls helped Citoyenne to collect her crockery, to put away her unused provisions. Madame, weary in spite of herself, but with a heart full of happiness, went into the house. Hope went slowly, very slowly in the direction of the bower. She had permission to stay there until the stable clock struck the half-hour.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LAST—THE BEST.

While the fun and the gaiety and the laughter, while the dancing and the light girlish screams of mirth could be heard issuing from the pleasure grounds of the School of La Chapelle, while la Comtesse danced with Citoyenne Pelven, while Joyce selected Henri as her little partner; crowds of the poor and hungry folks who belonged to the small and sadly-neglected town of Tourelle, had gathered on the dusty high road to see, as they expressed it, the sport, the revelry, that went on amongst the wicked aristocrats. The people who looked on were very hungry; these people were, many of them, but half clothed; these people knew but too well the scorching heat of summer, and the piercing cold of winter. They truly belonged to *the people,* and their hearts burnt within them. Amongst the many who looked on, who peeped as high as they could above the plantation and over the strong iron fence, might have been seen the angry red face of Citoyenne Lafarge. She was accompanied by her five children, and was angry of the angry: furious with some of that fury which had led to the French Revolu-

tion in the times of long ago. The torture, the rage of her heart, knew no bounds when she beheld—yes, beheld with her own eyes—Madame la Comtesse de Très, the woman who was well known to be one of the proudest in France, dancing with her own confrère, Citoyenne Pelven. Her anger grew still greater when she beheld a demoiselle of the School dancing with light and swift measure, and behold! oh, behold! with no less a person than Henri Sarci, the little page-boy whom Citoyenne Pelven called her "little son." There was he in very truth—there was he in his pale-blue velvet suit; his blue silk stockings; his little, blue kid shoes; and he danced as well as the best—the angry Citoyenne could not but acknowledge this.

"Ah!" she whispered under her breath; "ah, bah!" she cried; and she pushed back her scanty red hair and looked at her thin and starving children, and felt very like cursing Citoyenne Pelven and "the little son."

"Art thou good for sport, *mon enfant?*" she asked her eldest child—a lank, long, ugly boy who kept close to his mother, and who sniffed now and then at the excellent smell of the tartlets, the *gâteaux,* the *chocolats* of all sorts and descriptions.

"Art thou good to act the part of a man, *mon enfant?*" continued Citoyenne Lafarge.

"*Ah, mais oui, certainement, ma mère,*" replied the boy, raising his eyes, half-starved, half-frightened, to her face.

"Then thou wilt do it," said Madame Lafarge, "for thou art taller, although thou art thinner, than he. Behold him whom I mean—*le petit Henri Sarci*—he whom Citoyenne Pelven calls her 'little son.' See him clothed in velvet of blue the most exquisite! See his legs encased in stockings of silk, and his feet in blue kid shoes!"

"Ah, *oui, ma mère,* I behold Henri, the strongest *garçon* in the whole of Tourelle."

"Ah, but thou wilt beat him, thou wilt try?" said Citoyenne. "Watch, and I will watch with thee. Provoke him with angry words, sneer at him as he deserves to be sneered at, and conduct him—hark! listen—to the willow tree which hangs over the round pond. When thou dost get him there, kick him in—ah, *kick* him in. Cover that pale-blue suit with the ugly mud of the pond. Spoil his beauty forevermore. He has black eyes now; make them blacker with thy fists, *mon garçon.* Harken, *mon garçon,* dost thou understand? dost thou obey?"

Now Roy Lafarge was just as timid a lad as Henri Sarci was the reverse. He nodded as though he would obey his mother; but he had no intention of doing so, none whatsoever. He felt that rather than fight with Henri he would fly the length of France *away* from Henri. But he must let his sore and angry mother think at least that he would obey her. The people from Tourelle who had come out to see the fête, grumbled and muttered—muttered and grumbled amongst themselves; but there was no one

with such a hard, such a bitterly hard heart, as that which was encased within the thin body of Citoyenne Lafarge.

The scene on which their eyes looked was ravishing; and they themselves had no spite against Citoyenne Pelven, for she was good-natured and often helped them in their need. It was Citoyenne Lafarge who used the sour oil and the bad butter and the flour of the worst, to make the cakes and the tartlets for the little boys and girls who could not afford to invade Citoyenne Pelven's pâtisserie. These good people knew this fact well, and had no sympathy for the angry woman. Certainly Roy, the thin, red-haired boy, had no sympathy whatsoever with his own mother at that moment.

All things come to an end, however; the sweet singing stopped, the stable clock struck its twelve solemn notes, and instantly there was comparative silence in the grounds. The various demoiselles retired to their rooms to talk over the delights of the fête.

Muriel crept to the honeysuckle bower and sat there trembling, and Joyce suddenly appeared in the great marquee. She wished to say a word to Citoyenne Pelven.

"Citoyenne," she said, "you exceeded yourself to-night. You did of the best—the very best for my friends and for my great fête. But behold; basketfuls remain."

"Never mind that, Mademoiselle Joyce," said Ci-

toyenne, who, after her dance with Madame, felt lifted into the seventh heaven. "Think not that I will charge thee, *chère mademoiselle,* with that which was not eaten at the feast. I will freshen these cakes and tartlets up anew, and behold! they will come out as nice as ever to-morrow, and those who want to buy, can buy. Behold, mademoiselle, I will give them at a reduction, at a price lower than my usual price. *Chère mademoiselle,* the expense shall not fall upon thy young shoulders."

"I want you to do something better than that," said Joyce. "To-night I kept my eyes very wide open, I kept my ears listening intently; and I saw and I heard just outside our iron fence, starving faces and angry voices. They belonged to the poor and the suffering of Tourelle. I desire, therefore, to pay in full for the contents of the baskets, Citoyenne Pelven; and I desire further that Henri, with thy help, should take them all—yes, all—to the little children who need *gâteaux, sirop, chocolat,* this *very night,* Citoyenne, before they go to bed. To-morrow I will pay you for everything, Citoyenne; but now you will of a certainty do my bidding?"

"In truth I will, mademoiselle," said the good Citoyenne. "Ah, but this has been a happy evening; but it is over. All good things come to an end. The evening is over, but the memory—it remains. *Ah, c'est vrai, c'est vrai.* Henri, *vite,* little son; hasten, thou, to carry out the wishes of this noble mademoiselle."

Five minutes later the grounds were completely cleared. Citoyenne had ordered a man with a mule cart to meet her outside the gates. She placed her crockery, her baskets full of sweetmeats, her *sirops* so delicious, in the cart; and then desiring Pierre Danton to keep by her side, she walked along, chattering to Henri as she did so.

"Ah, ah," she cried, "I shall not sleep for nights. It is true; not for nights! Henri, think of the honour; I, of the people, danced with la Comtesse de Trés; and thou, in thy blue velvet suit, lookest like a little king in miniature. Ah, and well did it suit thee, *mon enfant;* well did that rich *toilette* become thee, my little son. I could almost change my views and cease to be one of the people, if indeed one like thyself were to mount the throne of France and be its King."

"Ah, but little mother," said Henri, "that could not be. For behold I *belong* to the people; and though I love to dance with Mademoiselle Joyce, yet my heart is with the hungry people."

"Ah! ah!" exclaimed Citoyenne, "and so is mine—and so, of a truth, is mine. But, *mon enfant,* listen, comprehend. That noble mademoiselle, Joyce Selby, she thinks not of herself but of others; and this night, this very night, Pierre is to take round the cart, and before we close our weary eyes, we are to distribute the good things—*the chocolats, the gâteaux, the sirops,* to the hungriest of the hungry children of Tourelle. It is the gift of Mademoiselle

Joyce to the hungry children. There is no one like her, say I, in the world!"

It was just at that very moment that Henri felt a dirty hand—thin, trembling exceedingly—laid on his little, blue velvet sleeve. He shook it off impatiently.

"What dôest thou here, Roy?" he enquired.

"I would ask for thy largest *gâteau,* and then, then to depart," said Roy in a choking, trembling voice.

"What was it thou didst say? I heard some of the words but not all."

"Keep thy hands off; thou wilt spoil my suit," said Henri, who had a hot little temper of his own. "Go quickly back to thy home, Roy, and do not touch me, for I am—ah, bah!—stronger than thou."

What with starvation, what with a sort of internal rage, what with a mixed terror of his angry mother and of the well-fed page-boy, Roy completely forgot himself, and raising a hand, which was so feeble that he could scarcely use it with any effect, he tried to plant what is known as a "black eye" on one of the sparkling, bright eyes of Henri Sarci. But before he could attempt even to reach his prey, Citoyenne Pelven was on him. In an instant she had lifted him bodily into the cart, had taken from a basket two or three *gâteaux* and some gingerbread to eat, had stuffed them into his hand, and then given Pierre a curt direction. Poor, little, terrified Roy scarcely knew what he was doing, or where he was

going. In less than no time they drew up at the house of Citoyenne Lafarge. Roy was lifted out by Citoyenne Pelven very tenderly, and, accompanied by herself, the "little son," as she called him, and one of the largest baskets of provisions, she boldly entered the house.

It was a shabby and miserable house. Citoyenne Lafarge had got over her first transports of rage. She was too weak and starved to be angry any longer.

"Ah! oh!" she cried, starting from her seat as she beheld Citoyenne Pelven. "Do not be too angry with me, *très bonne madame;* but I am weak—weak with the hunger, and the little ones cry and cannot sleep. Did Roy do much to thy boy? But thy boy is full and mine is empty. He could not have hurt him *much.* Oh, oh, how white *mon fils* looks! Thou hast brought him here. Ah, but he has *had* something to eat. I see the crumbs on his little, ragged suit. Ah, Citoyenne, forgive me, forgive a mother who has been turned into a wolf because of the needs of her children."

"Thy son did nothing to my son," replied Citoyenne. "Thinkest thou that he *could?* He did his best, poor starveling, but I prevented it. Why shouldst thou try to injure those who are willing to help thee, Citoyenne Lafarge? Behold, behold, behold!" Here she took great bags full of *gâteaux* out of her basket. *Chocolats* followed; sandwiches made of the best *pâté de foie gras* again followed. Every possible kind of dainty appeared on the bare,

dirty, ugly table. Little bottles of *sirop* stood in a row, just behind the good things to eat.

"Here is enough," said Citoyenne Pelven, "enough for thee and for thine; get the hungry children and bid them eat. This food of the best has been given to thee by that gracious mademoiselle who gave the fête at La Chapelle. She gave the fête and she gave orders that all, *all* that was left, was to be distributed amongst the poor and hungry of Tourelle. Eat, Citoyenne, eat and drink. These *sirops,* behold! I never made their like before. I shall, *peut-être,* never make their like again; they only want fresh water from the well for the thirsty to drink and to be revived. Thou hast a well in thy back yard, and the water is good. Ah, well do I know it, it is of the best! And behold again, here is a great jug of milk, and here are cakes of chocolate. Make chocolate for *les enfants,* Citoyenne; hot, nourishing, for the great cold of hunger causes the heart to despair. And to-morrow, *peut-être,* I will talk to thee, Citoyenne; for see, are we not neighbours? And why should we cut each other's throats? Now I must depart with my little son, for there are others besides thyself and thy children at Tourelle, who are hungry to-night, Citoyenne."

Without a single additional word, without opening her lips to add to or to take from what she had already spoken, good Citoyenne Pelven departed with her empty basket; and the little girls who were listening and trembling upstairs, crept down and scram-

bled for the good food, such food as they had never before in their lives tasted.

It was, however, the little daughter who was called Jeanne, who really prepared the nourishing *chocolat;* for Citoyenne Lafarge was kneeling in a corner of the room, her red, ugly face covered by her red, ugly hands; while tears streamed in torrents from her eyes.

"*Le bon Dieu,*" she kept repeating. "He *is* good after all; and for me, I am but a wicked, a very wicked woman."

It was little Jeanne who coaxed her mother to eat, and who tenderly, with her trembling, shaking hand, wiped the tears from that mother's weak eyes.

"Ah, Jeanne," said the mother, "I did wrong—I did wrong. Roy, my boy, didst thou hurt him much?"

"I could not, *ma mère,*" replied Roy, "because—why, I had not the strength. But they were so good to me, *ma mère;* they put me into the mule cart and gave me cakes to eat; after that I could do nothing more."

"I thank the good God; I thank Him mightily," said Madame Lafarge.

Meanwhile, in that honeysuckle bower, which was now so full of beauty; so sweet with the sweetest scent, perhaps, in all the world; there sat waiting for her fate a miserable, distracted girl. She listened, she strained her ears, she strained her eyesight. Eager little figures were passing quickly into the

house; eager voices were calling to each other; but no one up to the present had come near the honeysuckle bower.

At last, however, quick, light steps were heard approaching. Muriel's heart beat rapidly. She knew those steps; there had been a time when she loved them; even now she respected them; even now she had a feeling for Hope Ashley which she possessed for no other girl in the world.

Hope came silently and swiftly into the bower. The first faint, faint dawn of what would be a glorious summer's day, was causing the stars to fade and the sky to glow with the beginning of a soft, roseate light. But Muriel's face was covered by her hands, and when Hope sat down close to her in the honeysuckle bower, she did not dare to look up.

The next minute, however, warm, tender, loving arms were round her. Kisses that only Hope could give, fell on her brow, her cheeks, her lips. Then Hope said in that melodious voice which was her charm:

"Muriel, Muriel darling, you must go through it; you must go through it to the bitter end. I know it will hurt you, but out of pain will come pleasure, out of sadness will come unspeakable joy. Joyce and I and—and the rest of the Commitee of *la Sociéte de Joie* have fully made up our minds. To-morrow we tell all—all to Madame la Comtesse de Trés. Joyce wishes it, so does every other girl connected with the Society. I would not join because I did not

think it right. Now all the rest of the girls have come round to my way of thinking. There will still be the Society of Joy, I feel quite certain on that point; but there will be no secret about it. Our fêtes will be given openly; and Madame herself will, I am sure, help us; and when the year of Joyce's Queendom has come to an end we may even induce Madame to take her place. But that is for the future, Muriel. What I now want to say is this: I know exactly what has occurred with you. You stole a letter. Muriel, dear Muriel, do not shrink. You stole a letter written by Françoise Dupuis to her stepmother in Paris. You wanted to use your handkerchief, and the letter fell out of your pocket. Henri was there and he saw you, and he saw the flashing white of the letter as it fell to the ground. Muriel, by our earnest request, we persuaded Citoyenne Pelven and Henri Sarci not to breathe a single word with regard to that letter until the feast was over—until to-morrow at noon. But before that time comes, Muriel, you must yourself confess your own sin; for it was a sin of the meanest. You opened the letter; you read its contents; you meant to injure poor Françoise. Now you must explain the truth to Françoise. Muriel, your very own society, *La Société de Joie,* cannot but lead to mischief. As far as possible we must abolish such Societies from the School. Madame will forgive you if you tell her all. Ah, but how noble she is, Muriel! And little Françoise is changed since she

has been treated kindly, and not as though she were the dirt beneath our feet. Will you, Muriel, come with me to-morrow at nine o'clock, and tell all, yes *all,* to Madame la Comtesse de Trés, and all to Françoise Dupuis? I have the letter in my possession, for Henri gave it to me, dear boy. Then, afterwards, the Society will confide its secret motives to the Comtesse de Trés, and when the Citoyenne arrives there will be no secret to tell, for all will be known. Ah, Muriel, you cannot refuse your old, old friend! You cannot live any longer in the icy cold! You want the warmth of love and of fellowship. See! I've made arrangements, and the clock strikes the half-hour. You are to sleep with me to-night in a room specially prepared for us both by our gracious Comtesse de Trés. Come, Muriel, come; the cup that you have to drink is bitter, but you will feel like a different girl after you have swallowed it."

Muriel sat perfectly motionless for the space of a minute, then she flung her arms round the neck of her old friend. She kissed her with quick passion; and, without uttering a single word, entered the house by her side.

But during the remainder of that summer's night, neither girl slept a great deal; and both girls talked incessantly.

Muriel explained the weight of lead which had rested on her heart; she was truly penitent—she did not for a single moment try to excuse herself. The sun was shining brightly into the room when the

two, locked in each other's arms—friends, close friends forevermore—dropped asleep.

To the minute at nine o'clock, Hope Ashley and Muriel St. John tapped at the private door of Madame's sitting-room.

Muriel just glanced at Hope, then went close up to Madame and told her everything.

"You can expel me, if you like, Madame," she said. "I deserve the worst punishment you can bestow. I have done this, I have done that, I have done the other." She counted her different crimes on her fingers, coming at last to the letter—the letter which she had deliberately opened, deliberately read, and meant to keep back as a proof of Françoise's perfidy. When she came to this point in her narrative, the Comtesse rose and rang a bell.

"Ask Mademoiselle Françoise Dupuis to come here," she said.

Three minutes later Françoise appeared. She started and turned a little white when she saw that Madame was not alone, but that Hope and Muriel were with her.

Madame la Comtesse looked at Muriel, and Muriel went straight up to Françoise.

"I found your letter," she said; "I took it, I read it. Here it is back again. It escaped from my pocket with my *mouchoir,* and Henri put his foot on it; and but for Hope there would have been great, great trouble last night, and my awful wickedness would have been exposed. I have nothing more

to say. I *did* open your letter, I *did* read it. Is it possible for you ever to forgive me?"

"Yes, I forgive you," said Françoise. "That is," she continued, "I forgive you *if chère Madame* and Hope Ashley wish it."

"We both wish it most earnestly, dear child," said Madame. "But listen, Françoise. It must be a true forgiveness, a *forgiving and a forgetting.* Are you equal to that, my child?"

"Oh, Madame," said Françoise—tears sprang to her eyes and rolled down her cheeks—"I will do anything for you and Hope."

"But it must not be for Hope and for me," said Madame; "it must be for Muriel and for *God.* Can you forgive in that sort of way, Françoise?"

"Will you, Françoise?" said Muriel, speaking in a tone so humble, so gentle, so unlike herself, that Françoise gazed at her in amazement.

"Ah, yes! Ah, yes!" she said, "to forgive and to forget—they are joyful words."

"And now, Muriel," continued Hope, "it is as we arranged, your duty to tell our beloved Madame la Comtesse the whole story which led to this story. You know to what I allude."

"May the other girls be present?" asked Muriel.

Once again Madame touched her bell. It was now Muriel's turn to give certain directions; and to the amazement of Madame la Comtesse, the room was almost immediately filled with thirty-two anxious-looking girls. Amongst them could be seen the

face and the noble figure of that young Queen amongst her companions, Joyce Selby.

"We have come," said Joyce, speaking quickly and taking the words out of Muriel's lips, "to make our full confession to you, *chère Madame.* Thinking it not altogether wrong, we formed a secret society which we called *la Société de Joie.* It was first inaugurated by Muriel. A certain number of girls formed the Committee, and one girl was Queen. I, Madame, was elected Queen, although I was somewhat surprised that Hope did not belong. Now we wish to tell you that the Society is no longer secret. You can abolish it altogether if you like, *chère madame,* or you can give us permission to continue it. The Queen is an absolute monarch, and my object during the remainder of my reign—that is, Madame, if you wish my reign to continue—is to help the poor and suffering *outside* ourselves. Have we your permission, or have we not, *chère madame?*"

"But I never thought of this," said Madame. "I never guessed it. Muriel, you were the originator. How did you manage?"

Then Muriel told the story of the supposed rats, and the story of the supposed Mother Superior; and looking up suddenly in the midst of her narration, she saw a strange look fill the eyes of Madame la Comtesse.

"Do you mean to tell me," she remarked, while a mingling of tears and laughter suffused her beautiful face, "that you rolled potatoes about to act as

rats?—and you yourself glided by as the late Mother Superior?"

"It is true; the trick was a silly one," said Muriel.

"It was a clever one, and it took me in completely. *Mes enfants,* I will not interfere with your secret society. The only thing is this—I wish to become a member. You *need* not have told me anything; you *have* told me all. At the end of a year, when you want a fresh Queen, you may, perhaps, appoint me. If you do, I shall not refuse. As to the rest of the School, *la Société de Joie* can still be kept a secret from them. There is no need that all should be known. I will attend your meetings. But I will do so not at midnight, but at the earlier hour of ten, so that, *mes enfants,* you may sleep soundly and well; so that the bag of potatoes need be used no longer; so that the dress of the poor late Mother Superior need not again be required. But we will make it in very truth a *Société de Joie;* and when we meet on these occasions, I, your mistress, your principal, will cease to be your mistress and principal. I will be, *mes enfants,* your *friend.* As to Queen Joyce, I bow before her. Hers is an *absolute monarchy;* and when my turn comes to reign as Queen, I will also help the poor and suffering of Tourelle."

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THE END.


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